

# Absolute Magnitude

## Science Fiction Adventures

Winter 1996

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*Kill all the Lawyers*

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*In the Missy Days  
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# Editorial Notes by Warren Lapine

$M = m + 5 + 5 \log p$

Currently there is a growing trend toward blurring the boundaries between science fiction and the literary mainstream. A number of editors would like for there to be no difference between the two fields. I'm not one of them.

Science fiction is vibrant and alive while mainstream literary fiction is nothing more than its effete cousin. Certainly there is some good work being done in the mainstream, but I'm not interested in emulating it, and I don't care if the mainstream critics fail to recognize science fiction for the grand thing that it is. Their opinions mean nothing to me. Mainstream critics have historically ridiculed the great works of their day. Shakespeare was considered nothing more than a hack by the literati of his day. Throughout the history of the English canon, the literati have consistently been wrong about which works would stand the test of time. Today's literati are just as wrong about science fiction as the Elizabethan literati were about Shakespeare.

This point is so obvious that I have long been amazed that no one in the literati has noticed, or acknowledged, it. I am even more amazed that there are those in the science fiction field desperate for the literati's approval. I'd suggest they move out of science fiction and into the mainstream. And while they're at it, I hope they'll take their pretensions with them. Science fiction's lack of pretension separates it from the mainstream just as Shakespeare's lack of pretention separated him from the sonneteers of his day.

Whenever I present this view I hear, "They call science fiction a ghetto for a reason." They do indeed call it a ghetto for a reason, but ghetto is their term, not ours. I don't accept it. Science fiction is not the ghetto: it's the best neighborhood in town. It's the only neighborhood that is supporting a thriving community. As long as we keep our boundaries firm, readers will be able to go into the science fiction section at their local book store and find something worth reading, and the field will continue to be strong and grow. I, for one, can't imagine having to pore through a mountain of pretentious garbage to find an occasional gem.

I say we keep our boundaries firm, and to hell with anyone who would weaken the field by debasing it. We are a strong and powerful field because we have kept ourselves apart from our weaker cousin, the literary mainstream. We can never let our guard down and allow science fiction to be subverted by the mainstream. And to those who would destroy our field in their hunger for accolades from the literati, I would say: not on my watch.

## Absolute Magnitude

Science Fiction Adventures

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*DNA Publications would like to congratulate Warren Lapine and Angela Kessler on their engagement!*

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Issue #6

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*Cover art by Kevin Murphy.*

*All interior artwork by Tim Ballou except illustration for "Liady Niady" by Jim Hoston.*





Jamie Wild's first published piece appeared in the Newcomer's Corner in *Absolute Magnitude* #4. In addition to writing short stories, he plays lead guitar in a heavy metal band. This is his third appearance in our pages. We had originally planned to print "Blockade Runner," another story set in this universe, but then Jamie sent us "The Cyber Way," which takes place earlier in the cycle, so we decided to save "Blockade Runner" for next issue.

# The Cyber Way

by Jamie Wild

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Shea pulled the computer jack from his skull and looked up at his two employers. "You're all set. Now, about my fee."

"Yes, about your fee..."

The fuckers were going to stiff him, Shea could see it in their eyes. He took a step forward; if things got nasty he needed to be close enough for his enhanced nervous system's speed to be a factor. "Look, guys, I delivered as promised. You're going to make millions of units out of this. Don't get greedy, it's not worth it. Think about it, you only owe me twenty thousand units. If you stiff me you'll never get another cyborg to work for you, and that's suicide in your line of business."

Morton smiled. "If anyone finds out that we stiffed you?"

"I'm sure as hell not going to be quiet about it," Shea said with more than just a little heat.

"That's what we figured," Morton's partner Trask said, reaching into his suit jacket.

Shea stepped forward and slammed his hand, fingers forward, into the son-of-a-bitch's chest. Shea's finger bones had been replaced with titanium steel, so he had no trouble smashing through the moron's rib cage, crushing his heart. Shea watched the look of astonishment on Trask's face. It was funny, they always looked so damn surprised, stupid shits. Shea let the body fall to the floor and then he reached into the suit jacket. He came away with a military battle pistol. This guy had been serious heat; he was no partner. Shea turned back to Morton and pointed the weapon at him. "Now, about my fee?"

"Jesus Christ, Jesus: Christ..."

"I don't give a shit about your god, I just want my money."

"Please, please don't kill me."

"Twenty thousand units."

"I haven't got it."

Shea shook his head. Fucking light weight. "What do you have?"

"I've got five with me, but I can get you the rest."

Yeah right, Shea thought. "I'm not sure why I'm going to tell you this, since it won't do you any good, but I am. When you play with the big boys, you either need to be honest or you need to be very good, and, friend, you're neither." Shea pulled the trigger and watched as red splashes erupted on Morton's chest. It took him three minutes to find the five thousand units and then let himself out of the hotel room.

This was not good, he'd been counting on that money. He wished to hell he could use the little banking scam that he had just set up for Morton, but he couldn't. Not if he ever wanted to work again. If word got out that he'd killed his employers and then used their scam, he'd be a dead man. No, he didn't need that. But still, his next payment was due and he was now ten thousand units short. Hell, he didn't even have the money to make the rent. Even so, he was doing better than

most cyborgs: after five years he was still a free agent. By this time, most cyborgs had fallen behind on their payments and had indentured themselves to the Network. That was not for Shea. The jobs were dangerous and the pay was for shit. It wasn't supposed to be like this. It was supposed to be glamorous, he was supposed to rich, people he didn't even know were supposed to love him. Damn, damn, damn!

His cellular phone began to ring.

Shea reached into his leather duster and took out the phone. "Shea here," he said, hoping that the call didn't have anything to do with the death of his former employer.

"Mr. Shea, this is Shelly and I'm calling for Mr. McCormick. He has some work for you. How soon can you be here?"

Shea smiled. "I'll be there in ten minutes."

"Very good." The connection broke.

This was indeed good. McCormick's work was usually dull, but it paid well and McCormick was dependable. Shea might make it one more month without becoming indentured. Maybe.

Ten minutes later Shea was in McCormick's office waiting for him. The office was spacious and tastefully decorated. Deeply polished mahoganies dominated the room. Five minutes later McCormick and another man arrived. The two looked to be of a kind, clean shaven, military hair cuts, and even though they were both in street clothes it was clear that they would be more comfortable in uniforms. These weren't guys that you wanted to cross.

"Thanks for getting here on such short notice. I've got an interesting project for you. It should be much more challenging than your usual fare."

Shea brightened. *This is what I need.* "Great, what do you have in mind?"

"Shea, this is Tom Anderson. He's one of my closest friends. I'm sure you've heard me talk about him. Someone's trying to kill him. We need you to help us find out who that someone is. I'm willing to give you double your normal fee."

Thank God! "Sounds good," Shea said to McCormick. Of Anderson he asked, "How do you know that someone is trying to kill you?"

"There's been an attempt on my life on each of the last two planets I've been to. I captured the first assassin. He told me that he was a member of a network and that I was fair game. The second assassin was a cyborg, I had one hell of a time killing him."

Shea took another look at Anderson. Real men weren't supposed to be that dangerous. This guy should only exist in a halo-vision program. "Jesus Christ, what do you need my help for?"

"I want to stop the attempts on my life. If you find out who's offering the contract, then I can find the responsible party and convince them to cancel it."

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God, I hope I'm not getting in over my head. "Okay. Where did the attacks happen?"

"The first one was on Eden, the second was on Tristen."

"You killed the man on Tristen?"

"I killed a cyborg on Tristen."

*Just what I fucking need, a killer with an attitude.* "Well, Eden's too far away for me to find anything out via the computer. But Tristen's within my range. Mind if I jack into your computer, McCormick?"

"Please do."

Shea pulled part of his forehead away to reveal the computer jack. He saw Anderson go white. The man was visibly shaken and clenching his chair for all he was worth. Fucking mundane. As soon as the jack was in place, Shea felt the flow of the net envelop him. The temptation to let himself be swallowed up in the energy current was a strong one. No matter how frequently he moved along the net, that temptation never weakened. He focused his awareness on the grid that spread out before him. McCormick's system was a good one; it dumped Shea several layers below where most systems would have. He was able to avoid a lot of the menial hacking that one normally had to do to get to the more interesting parts of the net. Shea found the energy flow that would lead him to the news reports on Tristen and followed it. Once there, the raw data flooded his senses. He let it wash through his mind and then he picked out the meaningful parts.

According to the report, Lem Detrick had been the assailant. Two police officers had died, and in a bizarre accident Detrick had been hit by a subway train. Looking for more helpful information, Shea moved along the net until he found a way into Tristen's police records. He circumnavigated three levels of security almost effortlessly and immersed himself in the police report. Officers Burke and Tereshko had been killed. Burke had definitely been killed by the cyborg, but it was unclear who had killed Tereshko. An unidentified male had been seen running from the scene, but it was unknown if that man had been involved with the killings. Further, Tereshko's vehicle had turned up in a subway station outside of the port. The unidentified man was being sought for questioning. At the moment they had no leads as to his whereabouts or his identity. Shea backed out, leaving no trail, and exited the matrix. He'd been there less than a minute.

He looked at Anderson. "Do you have any idea who that cyborg you killed was?"

"None."

"You killed Lem Detrick?"

"So?"

"So, he's probably the best hit man in the sector. I mean he was. He had this thing about killing at close range. I guess that's what did him in. How did you get him?"

"In the end, I didn't. He got hit by a train, but if I had been holding more than a nine millimeter when I outdrew him, I would have killed him. As it was, I only knocked him down."

Outdrew him? Jesus Christ, what was this guy? "You couldn't have outdrawn him. His nervous system was cybernetically enhanced. He had to be at least twice as fast as you."

"Maybe he missed his last tuncup."

"Jack, I thought all those stories you told me about Anderson The Enforcer were bullshit, but this guy is the genuine article."

"Was I implicated in any of the killings?"

"The report I read mentioned an unidentified male had been spotted running from the scene, but they don't have any leads. It looks like you're in the clear."

"Good, but now how do we find out who hired Detrick?"

"That's a breeze, Detrick was a cyborg, he worked for The Network. I'll just infiltrate their data banks and rifle their files. Nothing to it."

"Good. When can you start?"

"Is now soon enough?"

McCormick nodded.

Shea jacked back into the computer and was once again immersed in the energy flow. This time he surrendered himself to the flow a bit more than he had the time before. The Network was hidden in the matrix several levels below the one he was on. He felt the euphoria of the surging energy as his consciences rushed downwards. It felt very much like riding a white-water raft, only faster. He hit an eddy in the matrix and pulled himself out of the downward flow. This was the level he was looking for. The Network's data banks weren't immediately obvious and it took Shea several nanoseconds to locate them and several more to get through nine levels of serious security. The Network's defenses were something. There was stuff here designed to kill. If you didn't know what you were doing, the Network would quite happily fry your brain.

Once inside, the information came at Shea in hyper mode. He'd never experienced anything this fast. It was all he could do just to hang onto his identity and let the information wash over him. Much of the data came in the form of incoherent streams, but some of it made sense. The first thing he identified was a blueprint of a Network installation. On impulse he sent that to McCormick's printer using a macro that would obscure the path as it went. Then he went searching against the flow for Anderson's name. There it was. He grabbed onto the information in the file and immersed himself in it. A million and a half units had been put down by one Daniel Chen. An immediate solution to the problem presented itself to Shea. All he had to do was switch the names and everything would be fine, for Anderson at least.

As soon as Shea tried to change the data he realized that he had made a terrible mistake. The data could only be changed from a single keyboard and not from cyberspace. Defenses that he hadn't even suspected sprang up all around him and tried to isolate and crush him. For a fraction of a nanosecond he thought they had him, but then he spotted a crack between two of the walls; it was tiny but he got through it and raced away into the matrix. He thought that was the end of it, when a blinding pulse of energy, larger than anything he'd ever seen inside the matrix, exploded from the Network's file.

It destroyed everything that it touched as it raced towards him considerably faster than he could every hope to move. Shea ducked down the first level transfer he happened upon. The energy burst followed him, leaving a wake of destruction behind it. Once Shea arrived on the next level, he realized that he was losing ground fast. He caught sight of another downward path. That wouldn't do. The energy burst would catch him before he hit the next level. In desperation he tried a maneuver that he'd only heard about. He went upward in a downward-moving flow. The energy was amazing, and had he not been running for his life he was certain he would have lost his concentration. Then he was out and on the next level. It worked! Shea's relief was short-lived. The energy burst emerged from the flow. He'd gained several nanoseconds, but that was only temporary. Moving for all he was worth, he surveyed the landscape of the matrix for someplace to hide. The sheer destructive force of his pursuer

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discouraged him from trying any of the host of fancy tricks he knew. He could well imagine himself going through some exotic double-back only to watch the energy pulse smash through the entire thing. He was about to panic when he caught sight of the monolithic data flow that was the Coalition. He'd been here before and knew the way in. The energy burst continued to pursue him, but as soon as it hit the Coalition's flow, serious defenses came up. The resulting fireworks were amazing. At another time Shea would have stuck around and watched the outcome, but at the moment he was more concerned with surviving so he exercised the better part of valor and slunk away.

Shea tore the jack from his head, and jumped out of his chair. "Good God, 'That was close."

"What happened?" McCormick demanded.

"Everything was going fine. I got into their database without too much difficulty. I found out who paid for the contract. Then I decided I could solve everyone's problem by switching Anderson's name with the name of the guy who paid for the hit. When I tried to change the data, all hell broke loose. I've never seen such a powerful defensive set up. It waited until I was completely committed, and then pounced on me. When it wasn't able to crush me, it just came after me, obliterating everything in its path. My god, it'll take the Net Rangers months to repair the damage it caused. I only just managed to divert the power surge that was tracking me to a different computer."

"You do realize that whoever owns the computer you diverted the surge to is going to die, don't you?" Anderson demanded.

"Of course I realize that. I sent the program into the Coalition's data banks. Give me some credit. I'm not going to let innocents get killed. I'm a cyborg, not a monster."

Anderson seemed amused. "They won't mess with the Coalition."

Shea looked at Anderson sharply. "You've got to be joking."

"What do you mean?"

"Everyone knows that the Networks are sanctioned by the Coalition. In exchange for their cut, they pretend it doesn't exist. The Coalition gets a piece of everyone's pie."

"Not the Coalition that I know."

"Then you're living in a dream, pal."

Anderson started to get up. McCormick put a restraining hand on his shoulder. "We'll talk about it later. Let it go for now."

"Okay then, let's get back to business. Who took the hit out on me?"

Shea went to the print outs. "Here it is, some guy named Chen. A million and a half units; he wants you bad."

"Chen?" Anderson said in apparent astonishment. "He couldn't afford that. He's just the captain of a battleship."

Maybe this guy was too stupid to live. "Everyone knows that the commander of a Coalition vessel can make a fortune smuggling. A million and a half units was probably just the money from one trip," Shea said.

Anderson jumped up. "Why you little shit!"

"Tom, calm down," McCormick said sharply, "He's right."

"He's right?"

"Yes, he's right. But that's not important at the moment. What is important is finding a way to get you out of this alive, and make Chen pay."

"I think I've got the answer," Shea said.

"We're listening," McCormick said.

"I had the right idea when I tried to change Anderson's name with Chen's. I just didn't go about it correctly. As I was exiting the Network's data banks, I realized that their system is set up so that it can only be altered from a single keyboard. That keyboard is in their main installation."

"How the hell does that help?" Anderson demanded.

"Well, before I went looking for the information you needed, I stumbled onto the floor plans. I figured they might be worth something to someone, so I printed them up. Their physical defenses aren't nearly as impressive as their computer defenses. If you iron men can get me in there, I can change the data. The trick is to get in and out of there without anyone knowing we were there. If the Network finds out we broke in, they'll figure out that we changed the database. If that happens, we're in for a world of pain. By the way, I want four times my usual fee." Shea watched the two men, but neither seemed to care about his wage demand. Oh, dear God, let this work out, please let this work out, he thought. This could mean breathing room, he might not have to live from month to month, hell maybe he'd even be able to take some time off.

Anderson looked over the floor plans. "There's no possible way we can get into this place without someone knowing we were there."

"Then you'll just have to hunt this Chen guy down," Shea said, pretending not to care.

Anderson leafed through the plans again. Under them he found an inventory. "According to this inventory, they have five million units, in cash, in their vault. If we broke in and stole it, they might not think to check their data banks. After all, our motive for breaking in would seem clear enough, wouldn't it?"

"You've got a lot of balls," Shea said shaking his head. "Do you have any idea what would happen if the Network finds out you stole their money?"

"I'm assuming that they would be very upset with me. Hell, they might even take out a contract on me."

"I see your point, but you can't do it yourself. Anyone who goes in there with you would also be exposed to the danger of retaliation."

"They'd be well paid for the risk. I think that the Network has overvalued the fear factor. Fear is not an adequate defense against theft. Not when you're talking about five million units."

"But, if anyone talks, you're dead."

"None of my people would talk," McCormick said. "Do you want in or not?"

"You're going along with this?"

"If Tom thinks we can pull this off, then I'm in."

Oh fuck, Shea thought. This is big. These guys want to take on the Network.

"What do you think, Shea? An even share of five million units?"

Shea tried not to show his surprise. He hadn't expected them to offer him an equal share. If they could pull this off, he could have anything he'd ever wanted. He'd never have to scrape by again. He couldn't even imagine what that would be like. "How many men would be in on it?"

"You, Jack, myself, and two others should be enough to do the job right. I'm sure you can do the math for yourself."

"A million units. Very tempting." Of course I'm in, you fucking moron.

"We need an answer," McCormick said.

"It depends on the other two guys. How trustworthy would they be?"

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"I've got five men on the payroll who served with me under Tom. I'm sure any of them would be willing to do whatever it takes to help him out. They'll all be quiet."

"When do you plan to do this?"

"We should be able to come up with a workable plan of action tonight."

"So, you're talking about doing this tomorrow?"

"Tom's up against the gun. We've got to do this as quickly as possible."

Shea smiled. "It's against my better judgment, but count me in."

"Good, meet us here tomorrow, around midnight."

Shea sat back in his easy chair and tried to picture a million units in his checking account. Damn, this is it. The brass ring, everything that he'd ever wanted. He'd become a cyborg for only one reason: money. He wanted lots of it. He wanted to be dirty, rotten, filthy, stinking rich. Nothing more than that. And these two psycho marines were going to make him just that. No more living in housing projects, existing from one illegal job to the next. Things were going to change for him. He could see it in his mind's eye. Beautiful women, fast cars, and expensive restaurants. The good life.

To celebrate the new job and get a head start on the beginning of his new life Shea had stopped at a trendy store and purchased the most expensive cigar they had, as well as a bottle of their most pretentious champagne, and a copy of *Gourmet Life*. He opened the magazine and began browsing through it. Rather dull, but he'd come to appreciate it. Then he lit the cigar; its foul taste burned down his throat into his lungs. Coughing and sputtering, he reached for a glass of the champagne. The mixture of cigar and champagne was the vilest thing Shea had ever tasted.

<sup>66</sup> "Shea," Anderson said, "your objective has changed."

"It has?"

"Yes, I don't want you to switch my name with Chen's."

"But, that's the whole point of the mission."

"No, the point of the mission is to stop the attacks on my life. What I want you to do is make it look like I was killed and the contract honored."

"But, then this Chen guy walks."

"No, he doesn't. I'll deal with him personally. I can't let someone else do this for me. That would make me just as bad as Chen."

"So what's wrong with that?"

"A lot. Just do it my way."

"Okay, but I have to do something with the money from the hit"

"Can you just have it deposited into an account without tipping our hand? Then we'll just divvy it up with the rest of the money."

"Yeah, I've got a program that can hide it. I still say it makes more sense to let someone else kill Chen."

"I just can't. Let's go."

McCormick issued everyone a TAZ 12 and combat armor. They brought along three times as much ammo as they intended to use, and enough explosives to level the entire complex if need be. One thing was for sure: these guys weren't lightweight.

Entry wasn't a problem; they flew a heavy flitter through the fence that surrounded the installation. Then they shot their way through glass doors at the main entrance and entered the building. Thirty seconds after they had arrived they were in the control room. The four guards there drew pistols and tried to drive them back. Shea felt sorry

for the guards as he watched them get mowed down. They had never had a chance.

McCormick went to the computer and turned the alarm systems off. "There, all's clear on this end."

Anderson took a set of keys from a blood-soaked body and tossed them to Diaz. "One of these keys should fit the computer room door. Escort Shea there. When you're done, make sure these keys find their way back here. We don't want to leave any clues as to why we're really here. Then meet us back at the flitter."

Diaz and Shea started off towards the computer room. They found it without any problem and Shea slid into the chair in front of the computer. It took him only a moment to do what was required of him.

"We're clear. Let's get the hell out of here."

Diaz nodded, and they started back to the control center to leave the keys. As they entered the room gunfire slammed into them. Diaz went down. Shea raised his rifle and opened fire as he backed out of the room. He never even saw who he was firing at, and he wasn't followed. Once he realized this, Shea turned and ran out of the installation. The others were waiting for him outside.

"Where's Diaz?" Anderson demanded of Shea.

"Diaz bought it when we went back to the control room to return the keys. I was lucky to get out alive."

Anderson looked at McCormick. "We can't leave him there. The Network will have us pegged by this time tomorrow."

"You're right. We have to go back."

"Matherson, you and Shea wait here. If things get too hot, you have my permission to leave. We're going back inside."

"You can't go back in there," Shea shouted. "There isn't enough time."

Shea couldn't believe it when Anderson and McCormick ignored him and reentered the building. These guys were out of their fuckin' minds. Cursing, Shea loaded his equipment into the flitter. He could hear sirens off in the distance, that was all he needed.

"Do you hear those sirens, Matherson? They're headed here. I guess we'll just have to run for it. Too bad about Anderson and McCormick."

Matherson looked with contempt at Shea and shook her head. "We're not going anywhere, asshole. I'd rather burn in hell than let them down. I'd suggest getting your rifle ready. Things may get hot."

Shea looked at her in disbelief. "Didn't you hear what Anderson said? We have his permission to leave."

"I heard him. He gave us his permission, but he didn't order me to leave, so I'm not leaving. If you want to hoof it out of here, be my guest."

Shea wanted to argue the point, but the first cruiser had pulled in and Matherson opened fire. Without any other options, Shea joined her. The police clearly hadn't expected to be engaging a fully armored force with assault weapons. The two didn't have much problem keeping the police from getting out of their flitters. But more and more of them were arriving. Shea was beginning to worry that eventually he and Matherson wouldn't be enough to hold them at bay when Anderson and McCormick emerged from the building. McCormick looked to be injured and Anderson, with Diaz's body over his shoulders, was helping McCormick get to the flitter.

When they reached the flitter Anderson tossed Diaz's body in and then helped McCormick in. "I thought I told you to leave if things got hot."



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"Believe me, I wanted to," Shea said. "But, this bitch wouldn't leave you behind. Said she'd rather burn in hell than let you two down."

Matherson slammed the flitter into gear; the police scattered as it jumped forward. Several squad flitters followed. Anderson kept up a heavy fire with his TAZ. Shea counted four flitters following. Enough of this shit, he thought, as he began lobbing grenades at the police flitters. They broke off the chase.

"We made it!" She exclaimed.

Anderson dropped his rifle and started to remove McCormick's armor. McCormick was no longer conscious. Shea could see that the wound was bad. Anderson stopped the bleeding and bandaged it. "We're going to need to get him to a hospital if he's going to make it," Anderson said to Matherson.

"We can't bring him to the hospital," Shea said. "The Network will find out who we are and then we're all dead."

"I'm not going to sit by and watch him die!"

"Sir," Matherson said. "Captain McCormick has a private regen tank and a staff doctor. I never understood why he kept such an expensive thing when he decided not to start up his merc outfit, but I guess it's just as well that he did."

Shea looked around his new apartment. It was fucking gorgeous, marble everywhere. His bank account had the right number of zeros now, but he didn't feel the way he had expected to. He'd just made enough money to ensure that he'd never have to work again. Somehow he'd expected to feel good about himself, superior, but damn it, he just didn't. Instead of enjoying his new found wealth he kept going over what Matherson had said to him. "I'd rather burn in hell than let them down."

Why was that driving him crazy? Why couldn't he find some peace and enjoy his money? What difference did it make if some crazy bitch was willing to burn in hell for someone? It made a lot of difference, Shea realized. He'd always felt alone and alienated and he'd believed that money could change that. Now he had the money and he felt even more alienated. Instead of celebrating, he was moping around his new place wishing someone would rather burn in hell than let him down. "This is fucking stupid," he said to himself.

Shea wanted to scream in frustration, but instead he picked up the phone and punched in the number for McCormick's circuitry firm. Three minutes later he was talking with Anderson.

"What is it, Shea? I'm very busy right now."

"Rumor has it that you and McCormick are starting a merc outfit?"

"What of it?"

"I want to buy in. I'd like to be an equal partner. I've still got most of my money from the heist."

"Have you lost your little mind?"

"No, Anderson, I want in."

"Why?"

"When you and McCormick went back into the compound, I tried to get Matherson to leave you behind and she wouldn't."

"This is supposed to mean something to me?"

"No, I guess not. You take it for granted that people are willing to die for you. I've never had that. Hell, I've never even had anyone that would be willing to be inconvenienced for me. I want to be a part of that."

"You can't just buy into that kind of loyalty, you have to earn it. You have to be willing to lay down your life for the other person. If

no one has ever been that loyal to you, I'd say it was because you've never been that loyal to anyone."

Shea nodded. "You're right, but I want to change that. Hell, I need to change that. Otherwise it'll haunt me forever."

"You're still not what I'd think of as a merc."

"You'll need some kind of tech support. That's where I'd come in."

"You do realize that if we did allow you in as a partner, McCormick and I would be able to outvote you any time we disagreed with you?"

"I'm really not worried about that."

"All right then, here's your chance to be a human being," Anderson said, breaking the connection.

A human being, that was it, Shea realized. He'd allowed himself, on some fundamental level, to be nothing more than a cyborg. He'd alienated himself. This was his first human act since getting the implant. It felt good.



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Harlan Ellison has been called "one of the greatest living American short story writers" by the *Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times* said, "It's long past time for Harlan Ellison to be awarded the title: 20th century Lewis Carroll." In a career spanning 40 years, he has won more awards for the 64 books he has written or edited, the more than 1700 stories, essays, articles and newspaper columns, the two dozen teleplays, and a dozen motion pictures he has created, than any other living fantasist.

## Along the Scenic Route

by Harlan Ellison

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### Introduction

When I arrived in Los Angeles on New Year's Day 1962, I discovered a city more wonderful than I had ever imagined. It had all the verve and passion of New York during its last really vibrant period—'54-'57—coupled with the insouciance of New Orleans before it became aware of itself as The Big Easy. It had the charm of small-town America and the urbanity of Big Town USA.

All that is gone, today. The demons of "Progress" as worshipped by ex-Governor Reagan and all the clone-idiots who have followed him in office since he singlehandedly destroyed the California educational system, have turned L.A. into yet another sprawling, choking, murderous, inconvenient, imbecile paradise for realtors, rapacious developers, illiterate gangs of slaughtering assholes, weirdos of every stripe, and that great American icon, OJ Simpson, may his dick fall off in his soup.

Nonetheless, I am an Angeleno. I've lived here longer than anywhere else in my peripatetic life, and I cannot think of a better place to reside, for all its drawbacks. (No, I'm not nuts about the earthquakes, but you've got the equivalent crap wherever you are—twister, flood, smog, Fundamentalists—so that part's a tradeoff.)

I wrote this story at least ten years, maybe more, before actual drive-by shootings became common throughout the U.S., commencing with L.A. at the cutting edge. I wrote it on the subject of middle-class conformity, mediocrity, and the utter stupidity of *macho* behavior. The idea that such a wild and improbable social conceit could become commonplace in less than a decade, never occurred to me. When the first freeway "duels" began out here, I was contacted by the AP, the UP, the INS, and a dozen newspapers. How they had made the liaison between my little fable, and the new reality, I never found out. Maybe someone working the *NY Times* night desk had read the story. They all asked me how I felt about "predicting" this phenomenon, and wasn't this another classic example of how insightful "sci-fi" was supposed to be? I didn't have the heart to tell them that if you've got hundreds of writers all wildly predicting anything they can think of, that eventually there will be a few hits (but in fact, sf has as lousy a hit-to-miss ratio on prediction and extrapolation as the most bogus fortune-teller found in the tabloids). Didn't have the heart—particularly after they pointed out that I'd coined the term "fax" in the same story—and decided to accept the mantle of Nostradamus.

All bullshit, of course, but how else are we clowns to stay in business? You can fool some of the people some of the time, and some of the people some of the time, but you can't fool *some* of the people *some* of the time. I think I've got that right.

The blood-red Mercury with the twin-mounted 7.6 mm Spandaus cut George off as he was shifting lanes. The Merc cut out sharply, three cars behind George, and the driver decked it. The boom of his gas-turbine engine got through George's baffling system without difficulty, like a fist in the ear. The Merc sprayed JP-4 gook and water in a wide fan from its jet nozzle and cut back in, a matter of inches in front of George's Chevy Piranha.

George slapped the selector control on the dash, lighting **YOU STUPID BASTARD, WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING AND I HOPE YOU CRASH & BURN, YOU SON OF A BITCH.** Jessica moaned softly with uncontrolled fear, but George could not hear her: he was screaming obscenities.

George kicked it into Overplunge and depressed the selector button extending the rotating buzzsaws. Dallas razors, they were called, in the repair shoppes. But the crimson Merc pulled away doing an easy 115.

"I'll get you, you beaver-sucker!" he howled.

The Piranha jumped, surged forward. But the Merc was already two dozen car-lengths down the Freeway. Adrenaline pumped through George's system. Beside him, Jessica put a hand on his arm. "Oh, forget it, George; it's just some young snot," she said. Always conciliatory.

"My masculinity's threatened," he murmured, and hunched over the wheel. Jessica looked toward heaven, wishing a bolt of lightning had come from that location many months past, striking Dr. Yasimir directly in his Freud, long before George

## Absolute Magnitude

could have picked up psychiatric justifications for his awful temper.

"Get me Collision Control!" George snarled at her.

Jessica shrugged, as if to say *here we go again*, and dialed CC on the peek. The smiling face of a fusco, Freeway Sector Control Operator, blurred green and yellow, then came into sharp focus. "Your request, sir?"

"Clearance for duel, Highway 101, northbound."

"Your license number, sir?"

"XUPD 88321," George said. He was scanning the Freeway, keeping the blood-red Mercury in sight, obstinately refusing to stud on the tracking sights.

"Your proposed opponent, sir?"

"Red Mercury GT. '88 model,"

"License, sir."

"Just a second," George pressed the stud for the instant replay and the last ten miles rewound on the Sony Backtracker. He ran it forward again till he caught the instant the Merc had passed him, froze the frame and got the number. "MFCS90909."

"One moment, sir."

George fretted behind the wheel. "Now what the hell's holding her up? Whenever you want service, they've got problems. But boy, when it comes tax time—"

The fusco came back and smiled. "I've checked our master Sector grid, sir, and I find authorization may be permitted, but I am required by law to inform you that your proposed opponent is more heavily armed than yourself."

George licked his lips. "What's he running?"

"Our records indicate 7.6 mm Spandau equipment, bulletproof screens and coded options."

George sat silently. His speed dropped. The tachometer fluttered, settled.

"Let him go, George," Jessica said. "You know he'd take you."

Two blotches of anger spread on George's cheeks. "Oh, yeah!?" He howled at the fusco, "Get me a confirm on that Mercury, Operator!"

She blurred off, and George decked the Piranha; it leaped forward. Jessica sighed with resignation and pulled the drawer out from beneath her bucket. She unfolded the g-suit and began stretching into it. She said nothing, but continued to shake her head.

"We'll see!" George said.

"Oh, George, when will you ever grow up?"

He did not answer but his nostrils flared with barely restrained anger.

The fusco smeared back and said, "Opponent confirms, sir. Freeway Underwriters have already cross-filed you as mutual beneficiaries. Please observe standard traffic regulations, and good luck, sir."

She vanished, and George set the Piranha on sleepwalker as he donned his own g-suit. He overrode the sleeper and was back on manual in moments.

"Now, you stuffer, *now* let's see!" 100. 110. 120.

He was gaining rapidly on the Merc now. As the Chevy hit 120, the mastercomp flashed red and suggested crossover.

George punched the selector and the telescoping arms of the buzzsaws retracted into the axles, even as the buzzsaws stopped whirling. In a moment—drawn back in, now merely fancy decorations in the hubcaps. The wheels retracted into the underbody of the Chevy and the air-cushion took over. Now the Chevy skimmed along, two inches above the roadbed of the Freeway.

Ahead, George could see the Merc also crossing over to air-cushion. 120. 135. 150.

"George, this is crazy!" Jessica said, her face in that characteristic shriek expression. "You're no hot-rodder, George. You're a family man, and this is the family car!"

George chuckled nastily. "I've had it with these fuzzfaces. Last year . . . you remember last year? . . . you remember when that punk stuffer ran us into the abutment? I swore I'd never put up with that kind of thing again. Why'd you think I had all the optionals installed?"

Jessica opened the tambour doors of the glove compartment and slid out the service tray. She unplugged the jar of anti-flash salve and began spreading it on her face and hands. "I *knew* I shouldn't have let you put that laser thing in this car!" George chuckled again. Fuzzfaces, punks, rodders!

George felt the Piranha surge forward, the big reliable Stirling engine recycling the hot air for more and more efficient thrust. Unlike the Merc's inefficient kerosene system, there was no exhaust emission from the nuclear power plant, the external combustion engine almost noiseless, the big radiator tailfin in the rear dissipating the tremendous heat, stabilizing the car as it swooshed along, two inches off the roadbed.

George knew he would catch the blood-red Mercury. Then one smartass punk was going to learn he couldn't flout law and order by running decent citizens off the Freeways!

"Get me my gun," George said.

Jessica shook her head with exasperation, reached under George's bucket, pulled out his drawer and handed him the bulky .45 automatic in its breakaway upside-down shoulder rig. George studded in the sleeper, worked his arms into the rig, tested the oiled leather of the holster, and when he was satisfied, returned the Piranha to manual.

"Oh, God," Jessica said, "John Dillinger rides again."

"Listen," George shouted, getting more furious with each stupidity she offered. "If you can't be of some help to me, just shut your damned mouth. I'd put you out and come back for you, but I'm in a duel . . . can you understand that? I'm in a duel!" She murmured a yes, George, and fell silent.

There was a transmission queef from the transceiver. George studded it on. No picture. Just vocal. It had to be the driver of the Mercury, up ahead of them. Beaming directly at one another's antennae, using a tightbeam directional, they could keep in touch: it was a standard trick used by rods to rattle their opponents.

"Hey, Boze, you not really gonna custer me, are you? Back'm, Boze. No bad trips, true. The kid'll drop back, hang a couple of biggies on ya, just to teach ya a little less'n, letcha swimaway." The voice of the driver was hard, merciless, the ugly sound of a driver used to being challenged.

## Along the Scenic Route

"Listen, you young snot," George said, grating his words, trying to sound more menacing than he felt, "I'm going to teach you the lesson!"

The Merc's driver laughed raucously.

"Boze, you *de-mote* me, true!"

"And stop calling me a bozo, you lousy little degenerate!"

"Ooooo-veeee, got me a thrasher this time out. Okay, Boze, you be custer an' I'll play arrow. Good shells, baby Boze!"

The finalizing queep sounded, and George gripped the wheel with hands that went knuckle-white. The Merc suddenly shot away from him. He had been steadily gaining, but now as though it had been springloaded, the Mercury burst forward, spraying gunk and water on both sides of the forty-foot lanes they were using. "Cut in his afterburner," George snarled. The driver of the Mercury had injected water into the exhaust for added thrust through the jet nozzle. The boom of the Merc's big, noisy engine hit him, and George studded in the rear-mounted propellers to give him more speed. 175. 185. 195.

He was crawling up the line toward the Merc. Gaining, gaining. Jessica pulled out her drawer and unfolded her crash-suit. It went on over the g-suit, and she let George know what she thought of his turning their Sunday Drive into a kamikaze duel.

He told her to stuff it and did a sleeper, donned his own crash-suit, applied flash salve, and lowered the bangup helmet onto his head.

Back on manual he crawled, crawled, till he was only fifty yards behind the Mercury, the gas-turbine vehicle sharp in his tinted windshield. "Put on your goggles . . . I'm going to show that punk who's a bozo. . ."

He pressed the stud to open the laser louvers. The needle-nosed glass tube peered out from its bay in the Chevy's hood. George read the power drain on his dash. The MHD power generator used to drive the laser was charging. He remembered what the salesman at Chick Williams Chevrolet had told him, pridefully, about the laser gun, when George had inquired about the optional.

*Dynamite feature, Mr. Jackson. Absolutely sensational. Works of a magneto hydro dynamic power generator. Latest thing in defense armament. You know, to achieve sufficient potency from a CC, laser, you'd need a glass tube a mile long. Well, sir, we both know that's impractical, to say the least, so the project engineers at Chevy's big Bombay plant developed the "stuck" method. Glass rods baffled with mirrors—360 feet of stack, the length of a football field . . . plus end-zones. Use it three ways. Punch a hole right through their tires at any speed under a hundred and twenty. If they're running a GT, you can put that hole right into the kerosene fuel tank, blow them off the road. Or, if they're running a Stirling just heat the radiator. When the radiator gets hotter than the engine, the whole works shuts down. Dynamite. Also . . . and this is with proper CC authorization, you can go straight for the old jugular. Use the beam on the driver. Makes a neat hole. Dynamite!*

"I'll take it," George murmured.

"What did you say?" Jessica asked.

"Nothing."

"George, you're a family man, not a rodder!"

"Stuff it!"

Then he was sorry he'd said it. She meant well. It was simply that . . . well, a man had to work hard to keep his balls. He looked sidewise at her. Wearing the Armadillo crash-suit, with its overlapping discs of ceramic material, she looked like a ferryflight pilot. The bangup hat hid her face. He wanted to apologize, but the moment had arrived. He locked the laser on the Merc, depressed the fire stud, and a beam of blinding light flashed from the hood of the Piranha. With the Merc on air-cushion, he had gone straight for the fuel tank.

But the Merc suddenly wasn't in front of him. Even as he had fired, the driver had sheered left into the next forty-foot-wide lane, and cut speed drastically. The Merc dropped back past them as the Piranha swooshed ahead.

"He's on my back!" George shouted.

The next moment Spandau slugs tore at the hide of the Chevy. George slapped the studs, and the bulletproof screens went up. But not before pinholes had appeared in the beryllium hide of the Chevy, exposing the boron fiber filaments that gave the car its lightweight maneuverability. "Stuffer!" George breathed, terribly frightened. The driver was on his back, could ride him into the ground.

He swerved, dropping flaps and skimming the Piranha back and forth in wide arcs, across the two lanes. The Merc hung on. The Spandaus chattered heavily. The screens would hold, but what else was the driver running? What were the "coded options" the CC fusco had mentioned?

"Now see what you've gotten us into!"

"Jess, shut up, shut up!"

The transceiver queeped. He studded it on, still swerving. This time the driver of the Merc was sending via microwave video. The face blurred in.

He was a young boy. In his teens. Acne.

"Punk! Stinking punk!" George screamed, trying to swerve, drop back, accelerate. Nothing. The blood-red Merc hung on his tailfin, pounding at him. If one of those bullets struck the radiator tailfin, ricocheted, pierced to the engine, got through the lead shielding around the reactor. Jessica was crying, huddled inside her Armadillo.

He was silently glad she was in the g-suit. He would try something illegal in a moment.

"Hey, Boze. What's your slit look like? If she's creamy'n'nice I might letcha drop her at the next getty, and come back for her later. With your insurance, baby, and my pickle, I can keep her creamy'n'nice."

"Fuzzfaced punk! I'll see you dead first!"

"You're a real thrasher, old dad. Wish you well, but it's soon over. Say bye-bye to the nice rodder. You gonna die, old dad!"

George was shrieking inarticulately.

The boy laughed wildly. He was up on something. Ferro-coke, perhaps. Or D4. Or merrylo. His eyes glistened blue and young and deadly as a snake.

## Absolute Magnitude

"Just wanted you to know the name of your piledriver, old dad. You can call me Billy. . . ."

And he was gone. The Merc slipped forward, closer, and George had only a moment to realize that this Billy could not possibly have the money to equip his car with a laser, and that was a godsend. But the Spandaus were hacking away at the bulletproof screens. They weren't meant for extended punishment like this. Damn that Detroit iron!

He had to make the illegal move now.

Thank god for the g-suits. A tight turn, across the lanes, in direct contravention of the authorization. And in a tight turn, without the g-suits, doing—he checked the speedometer and tach—250 mph, the blood slams up against one side of the body. The g-suits would squeeze the side of the body where the blood tried to pool up. They would live. If . . .

He spun the wheel hard, slamming down on the accelerator. The Merc slewed sidewise and caught the turn. He never had a chance. He pulled out of the illegal turn, and their positions were the same. But the Merc had dropped back several car-lengths. Then from the transceiver there was a queep and he did not even stud in as the Police Copter overhead tightbeamed him in an authoritative voice:

"XUPD 88321. Warning! You will be in contravention of your dueling authorization if you try another maneuver of that sort! You are warned to keep to your lanes and the standard rules of road courtesy!"

Then it queeped, and George felt the universe settling like silt over him. He was being killed by the system.

He'd have to eject. The seat would save him and Jessica. He tried to tell her, but she had fainted.

*How did I get into this?* he pleaded with himself. *Dear God, I swear if you get me out of this alive I'll never never go mad like this again. Please God.*

Then the Merc was up on him again, pulling up alongside!

The window went down on the passenger side of the Mercury, and George whipped a glance across to see Billy with his lips skinned back from his teeth under the windblast and acceleration, aiming a .45 at him. Barely thinking, George studied the bumpers.

The super-conducting magnetic bumpers took hold, sucked Billy into his magnetic field, and they collided with a crash that shook the .45 out of the rodder's hand. In the instant of collision, George realized he had made his chance, and dropped back. In a moment he was riding the Merc's tail again.

Naked barbarism took hold. He wanted to kill now. Not crash the other, not wound the other, not stop the other—*kill the other!* Messages to God were forgotten.

He locked-in the laser and aimed for the windshield bubble. His sights caught the rear of the bubble, fastened to the outline of Billy's head, and George fired.

As the bolt of light struck the bubble, a black spot appeared, and remained for the seconds the laser touched. When the light cut off, the black spot vanished. George cursed, screamed, cried, in fear and helplessness.

The Merc was equipped with a frequency-sensitive laserproof windshield. Chemicals in the windshield would "go

black," opaque at certain frequencies, momentarily, anywhere a laser light touched them. He should have known. A duelist like this Billy, trained in weaponry, equipped for whatever might chance down a Freeway. Another coded optional. George found he was crying, piteously, within the cavern of his bangup hat.

Then the Merc was swerving again, executing a roll and dip that George could not understand, could not predict. Then the Merc dropped speed suddenly, and George found himself almost running up the jet nozzle of the blood-red vehicle.

He spun out and around, and Billy was behind him once more, closing in for the kill. He sent the propellers to full spin and reached for eternity. 270. 280. 290.

Then he heard the sizzling, and jerked his head around to see the back wall of the car rippling. *Oh my God*, he thought, *he can't afford a laser but he's got an inductor beam!*

The beam was setting up strong local eddy currents in the beryllium hide of the Chevy. He'd rip a hole in the skin, the air would whip through, the car would go out of control.

George knew he was dead.

And Jessica.

And all because of this punk, this rodder fuzzface!

The Merc closed in confidently.

George thought wildly. There was no time for anything but the blind plunging panic of random thought. The speedometer and the tach agreed. They were doing 300 mph.

Riding on air-cushions.

The thought slipped through his panic.

It was the only possibility. He ripped off his bangup hat, and fumbled Jessica's loose. He hugged them in his lap with his free hand, and managed to stud down the window on the driver's side. Instantly, a blast of wind and accelerated air skinned back his lips, plastered his cheeks hollowly, made a death's head of Jessica's features. He fought to keep the Chevy stable, gyro'd.

Then, holding the bangup hats by their straps, he forced them around the edge of the window where the force of his speed jammed them against the side of the Chevy. Then he let go. And studied up the window. And braked sharply.

The bulky bangup hats sped away, hit the road, rolled directly into the path of the Merc. They disappeared underneath the blood-red car, and instantly the vehicle hit the Freeway. George swerved out of the way, dropping speed quickly.

The Merc hit with a crash, bounced, hit again, bounced and hit, bounced and hit. As it went past the P ranha, George saw Billy caroming off the insides of the car.

He watched the vehicle skid, wheelless, for a quarter of a mile down the Freeway before it caught the inner breakwall of the Jersey Barrier, shot high in the air, and came down turning over. It landed on the bubble, which burst, and exploded in a flash of fire and smoke that rocked the Chevy.

At three hundred miles per hour, two inches above the Freeway, riding on air, anything that broke up the air bubble would be a lethal weapon. He had won the duel. That Billy was dead.

## Along the Scenic Route

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George pulled in at the next getty, and sat in the lot. Jessica came around finally. He was slumped over the wheel, shaking, unable to speak.

She looked over at him, then reached out a trembling hand to touch his shoulder. He jumped at the infinitesimal pressure, felt through the g- and crash-suits. She started to speak, but the peek queeped, and she studded it on.

"Sector Control, sir." The fusco smiled.

He did not look up.

"Congratulations, sir. Despite one possible infraction, your duel has been logged as legal and binding. You'll be pleased to know that the occupant of the car you challenged was rated number one in the entire Central and Western Freeway circuits. Now that Mr. Bonney has been finalized, we are entering your name on the dueling records. Underwriters have asked us to inform you that a check will be in the mails to you within twenty-four hours.

"Again, sir, congratulations."

The peek went dead, and George tried to focus on the parking lot of the neon-and-silver getty. It had been a terrible experience. He never wanted to use a car that way again. It had been some other George, certainly not him.

"I'm a family man," he repeated Jessica's words. "And this is just a family car . . . I . . ."

She was smiling gently at him. Then they were in each other's arms, and he was crying, and she was saying that's all right, George, you had to do it, it's all right.

And the peek queeped.

She studded it on and the face of the fusco smiled back at her. "Congratulations, sir, you'll be pleased to know that Sector Control already has fifteen duel challenges for you.

"Mr. Ronnie Lee Hauptman of Dallas has asked for first challenge, and is, at this moment, speeding toward you with an ETA of 6:15 this evening. In the event Mr. Hauptman does not survive, you have waiting challenges from Mr. Fred Bull of Chatsworth, California . . . Mr. Leo Fowler of Philadelphia . . . Mr. Emil Zalenko of . . ."

George did not hear the list. He was trying desperately, with clubbed fingers, to extricate himself from the strangling folds of g- and crash-suits. But he knew it was no good. He would have to fight. In the world of the Freeway, there was no place for a walking man.

*The Author wishes to thank Mr. Ben Bova, formerly of the Avco Everett Research Laboratory (Everett, Massachusetts), for his assistance in preparing the extrapolative technical background of this story.*



Hal Clement [Harry Clement Stubbs] was born in Massachusetts in 1922. He has been a science lover from early childhood, at least partly as a result of a 1930 *Buck Rogers* panel in which villains were "headed for Mars, 47 million miles away." He majored in astronomy at Harvard, and has master's degrees in education and in chemistry. He earned his living as a teacher of chemistry at Milton Academy in Massachusetts until his retirement in June 1987. He is widely considered the Father of Hard SF, and his novel *Mission of Gravity* is generally accepted as the best hard SF novel ever written.

## Hal Clement: An Interview

by Warren Lapine

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**Absolute Magnitude:** Are you currently working on anything?

**Hal Clement:** I am assembling the four stories that I recently sold to *Absolute Magnitude* into one novel.

**AM:** How's that going?

**HC:** Well, slowly. I haven't been working very hard at it because I don't have a customer for it yet. Every time I think of something to do, I go ahead and do it. I won't really settle down and make sure everything is in proper order until I have a customer and a deadline.

**AM:** Are you waiting to have someone contact you or are you shopping it around?

**HC:** Well, I'm mentioning at science fiction conventions that the project is going on. I'm not seriously worried about someone's nibbling at it sooner or later.

**AM:** You've been a science fiction writer for a long time. How has the field changed since you first started in it?

**HC:** I sold my first story in October of '41. At the time, about the only markets were the three big magazines: *Astounding* [now *Analog*], *Amazing*, and *Wonder Stories*. This was not exactly pre-World War II, but it was pre-my participation in World War II. At the end of the war, after the nuclear bomb first went off, science fiction began to become much more popular. There was a lot more book publication in the field, collections of old stories and book publication of stories that had been serialized in magazines and so on. I guess like every other kind of publication the field has simply gone up and I suppose it will continue to do so until we either run out of trees or abandon books.

**AM:** Do you like the field more or less today?

**HC:** Oh, I enjoy it, I always have. There's more competition, which is perfectly harmless though sometimes irritating. It's a little more difficult to think of a story or a basic idea that somebody hasn't played with before. But that's not really critical because you can always do something different with the basic idea. It's not like—as I remember, back around the beginning of this century, a fellow named Stanley Waterloo wrote a caveman story, "The Story of Ab." A little bit later Jack London came up with "Before Adam," and Waterloo tried to sue him for plagiarism on the basic idea of a caveman story. Certainly that couldn't happen now.

**AM:** Do you think that any of today's editors will measure up to the editors of yesterday—people such as Del Ray or Campbell?

**HC:** Yes, I'm sure they will. I don't know which ones they will be and I don't know that they will be recognized immediately. Competent and original people keep getting born and growing up.

**AM:** I've heard you referred to as the Father of Hard SF. How do you feel about that?

**HC:** I am flattered of course. I'm not sure that it is exactly correct. I think that it [hard SF] grew up over a number of generations. I was possibly, not a discontinuity, but a change of slope in the field. That is the most I would be willing to admit.

**AM:** *Mission of Gravity* is generally accepted as being the best hard science fiction novel ever written. Has that been hard to live up to?

**HC:** I don't know that I have lived up to it. It's a little bothersome to realize that I'm best known for something I did over forty years ago.

**AM:** Why do you think that is? Some of your work has definitely achieved some of the same scope, but not the same recognition.

**HC:** Well, that may be the change in slope I mentioned. *Mission of Gravity* may have represented a jump and I haven't been able to make any larger jumps since, that would be as noticeable. That's just a guess.

**AM:** You're seventy two years old now, and your work has been appearing in some of the newer magazines such as *Mindsparks* and *Absolute Magnitude*. Are you surprised by the interest of the younger editors in your work?

**HC:** Not particularly. There are always going to be some people who like it, and a number of people who don't. Someday I wish a sufficiently large number of people who liked it would vote for Nebulas or Hugos.

**AM:** I understand you were once present during the testing and detonation of a nuclear bomb. What was that like?

**HC:** Interesting. That was in March of 1953. I was on extended active duty then. It was technically my Korea tour, though I never actually got overseas. I was an instructor at the nuclear weapons school at Sandia Base. One of the courses I was teaching was in weapons



## Hal Clement: An Interview

effects. It occurred to some official that I ought to go see what some of the effects were. So there I was in a trench out in the Nevada desert about four thousand yards from a tower with a forty kiloton weapon mounted on it.

**AM:** Could you describe the actual experience?

**HC:** It was predawn or at least pre-sunrise. Some of the jets buzzing around overhead were leaving contrails in the sunlight so the sun was nearly up. We were lined up in trenches in various distances. Most of us were at about four thousand yards. There was a volunteer group up at twenty five hundred yards. We were given all sorts of briefings. We were told to kneel down on one knee and stay down until we were told to get up. And if the blast happened to wreck the PA system so we couldn't be told to get up, to be sure and wait for at least a certain number of seconds before getting up. So we got to the countdown, and I distinctly remember at minus two suddenly thinking to myself, Stubbs, this is an experiment. No one knows what's going to happen. What are you doing here? But since it was at minus two there wasn't time to do much about it. I had figured out the sort of things that I could expect to have happen. It would be ten or twelve seconds before the sound wave got to me and that sort of stuff. I watched my luminous watch and all of sudden I didn't need the luminous part to see it. Everything turned into daylight, except that it was a little bluer than actual daylight. If you've seen burning magnesium you have a general idea of it. So I knew the thing had gone off and I proceeded to start counting the ten seconds or so before the sound wave got to me. I have to admit that I was taken by surprise when I shouldn't have been. I'd had a perfectly good course in seismology a few years before. Between two and three seconds the whole trench rocked back and forth as the seismic wave hit. I figured out what had happened immediately so I wasn't panicked. Then I waited for the rest of the count and the sound wave got to us. There is no real way to describe it, all you can do is use words like *extremely loud*. I recognized another phenomenon which no one had told me about before but I should have thought of. They tell you that in sound waves the motion of the air molecules along the path of the wave is very very tiny. It's the wave itself that does most of the moving. This is true, if you're not talking about a sound wave with a period of more than a whole second. With something like that, the molecules move quite a bit, so a wind came from the tower side of the trench and dumped some dirt down my neck. Then the return wave, the low-pressure side of the wave, lasted a good deal longer because the high-pressure side could get up to two or three or ten times atmospheric pressure, but there was no way for the lower side to get below zero pressure. So the time had to stretch out, and there was an even longer low-pressure phase and that swept a good deal of dirt from the back side of the trench down my neck. After that the P.A. came on and they told us we could get up. We went up and looked at the mushroom cloud. The stem was just joining the head. It was as you've seen in pictures. The reddish brown of oxides of nitrogen was quite visible and there was a blue ionization glow. It was worth watching and I don't think anyone said anything for quite a while as it went on up.

**AM:** Since you've made it to seventy two, I guess you haven't had any problem with the radiation.

**HC:** As far as I know I haven't. Two or three decades ago there was some sort of effort made by people to find out who had been exposed

to how much. I submitted my information and got a not back saying, I forget now whether it was .3 rem or a little more. It didn't amount to enough to get fussy about. In any case if I get cancer now there are too many other possible causes. I've gone to, I don't know how many, scores of science fiction conventions by jet, which has given me an overload of cosmic rays. I taught high school chemistry for forty years, so I've been exposed to asbestos, benzene derivatives, metals such as lead and mercury, and really nasty metals such as cadmium and nickel. I've been reasonably careful, but I didn't know all of them were as dangerous as is now known. Some of my colleagues smoked, and my wife smoked until ten or eleven years ago. Too many other things, so I'm not going to soak the taxpayers if I come down with cancer.

**AM:** So you've run into things more dangerous than nuclear radiation?

**HC:** It seems so to me. I live in New England for that matter, with a respectable fraction of the rocks and soil of granitic origin. Which means about ten grams of uranium to the ton.

**AM:** Being a hard SF writer means you have to keep up with technological advances. How do you do that?

**HC:** With difficulty. I subscribe to *Scientific American*, and I'm a member of the New England Science Museum and I get their publications. I keep my ears open at conventions which are attended by a fair number of competent scientists. Of course a fair number of people try to sound out their new theories on me. I get a great deal of fun out of trying to decide how these jibe with what we already think we know.

**AM:** As someone who was around before the space program, what do you think of how it started out and where it's headed?

**HC:** Well, I never doubted that there would be one eventually. I'm not entirely sure of any organization operated by what amounts to a bureaucracy. The old crack about a camel being a horse designed by a committee, I'm afraid applies. I'd like to see it go on. There are aspects of it that I'm more in favor of than others. The research aspect is the most important. I don't think there's any serious likelihood for many generations of our relieving earth's population into space. Not unless a real, genuine breakthrough occurs that makes space travel as cheap and convenient as riding in an automobile. I don't foresee that. The importance of getting equipment out there and learning more about the universe seems pretty obvious to me.

**AM:** Do you have any advice for new science fiction writers?

**HC:** The first thing everyone will tell you keep sending the stuff in. If you don't, you're dead. If you don't try to sell it, you certainly won't. The second thing is a little harder to specify. It has to do with judgment of your own work. You can't be completely critical of your own work. What you need is a friend or a group of friends, not the sort that will say "Hey, isn't that wonderful?" of everything you write, but of the sort will look over a paragraph and say "Hey, what in the blazes were you trying to say here?" Writing groups are just friends that write at each other; that's the sort of thing you need.

**AM:** Has convention-going changed much since First Fandom?

## Absolute Magnitude

HC: There have been more and more conventions with broader and broader range of interests. Some are still quite general in nature and others zero in on games or comic books. They all have their good points. I prefer the general ones. I don't know of any convention that zeros in completely on hard science fiction. If you know of one please tell me. You get most of the hard science fiction in the more general ones.

**FM:** Is there anything you'd like to say to your fans??

HC: Just thanks!



### Year One Billion

by Ken R. Martin

I pull my collar but it's already up  
The sun burns before me  
but the chill cuts deep  
deeper than my bones  
My shoes kick the sand  
and watch it tumble  
Everywhere sand . . .  
except the sea

The sea is a crust of salt,  
a white plain that stretches  
to the rim of my vision.  
And motionless above  
this cold dead sea . . .  
the sun.

The sun is a swollen ruin,  
a massive red ball  
flattened at the poles.  
Swollen by its dying  
it has set as far as it will  
on the horizon of . . .  
the earth

The earth is barren  
and in the end  
all is salt and sand  
desolate and sad  
no trace of man  
and worst of all . . .  
the visitors from the stars  
no longer come



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Ed. Richard Gilliam, Martin H. Greenberg, Edward E. Kramer

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## Praxitales

by Nye Marnach

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This is a story of faith, myth, trust, guilt, and the way belief can cage you as soundly as bars of steel . . . .

**T**his isn't an academic facility. This is a military installation. God damn it. Things got hot, and Gidford sold me to the military.

The cab was pulling away, leaving me freezing by a wooden sign that read "Pacific Northwestern Oceanic Institute." A path led down to a gate in the chain-link and barbed wire fence. In the distance, amid inky pines, white 1940s barracks glowed fuzzily like elongated doghouses beneath neon lights. I knew it. It's a hoax. A cover. They probably want me to wire bombs into dolphin brains. Make them into sentient weapons.

Clutching my purse, briefcase, and duffel bag, I skidded down the path, snow squeaking beneath my sneakers. It was midnight and I was late, thanks to a train that had broken down no less than seven times in the past three days. I was now about an hour above Seattle in, as Gidford had explained it to me, "some God forsaken wilderness in the middle of nowhere." Anyway it sliced, I was a long ways from my native Miami. I'm not going to do this. And I'm going to kill Gidford.

For a military installation, security seemed poor: no one was around. Reaching the closest building, I hopped up fragile wooden steps. Breathing puffs of ice, I banged on the door with a tingling fist clutched around the leather handle of my briefcase. After a few minutes, I shouldered my purse, dropped the briefcase between my numb feet, and tried the frozen door knob. It turned.

Shivering in a windbreaker never intended for snow, I entered. A small entry room—white plaster walls, worn, and thick red carpet, smelling moldy, furniture worn threadbare. A heater forced a warm breeze, and bare light bulbs lit the little room and an empty hallway that stretched down the length of the building. No one was around.

I stomped my wet feet. No one appeared.

I'll stay the night. That's all. Wooden doors lined the hall. Hoping to find someone, I walked down the hall, stopping to examine the notes, letters and cartoons stapled on each door—the familiar spoor of academia. *Offices or laboratories? Dormitories?* For a moment I felt comfort, but then I reminded myself that scientists who worked for the military had gone to college, too. God damn it.

Unsure of what to do, and standing before one of the doors, I heard the faint whistery noise of pages being turned. Hesitantly, because no light slivered around the door frame, I knocked on it.

A chair scraped back. Footsteps. The door swung away from me. "Is this a . . ." I started.

Out of the blackness emerged a tall, lean man. Fifty-ish. A professor? His long white hair was pulled into a ponytail, and his cheekbones were high and face wide like an American Indian. He wore a red plaid shirt and blue jeans, which I was beginning to suspect was the official uniform for the State of Washington. Holding a book in one hand, a long forefinger marking a page, and leaning against the

door frame, he considered me silently with marble blue eyes.

"Is this a military installation?" I tried to sound insulted, but paused then. As far as I could tell, the man was not breathing. "I'm Helene Connor," I added, "from the Miami Oceanarium and Bathypelagic Institute." I stopped again, and waited.

He was holding his breath; he exhaled with phenomenal slowness. "My dear," he said, finally, quietly.

His expression asked me why I had knocked on his door in the middle of the night. "I'm here about . . ."

"Praxitales," he started, as slowly as he had been breathing. He broke the word into gentle syllables. *Prax-eh-tal-eez*. "Rol-lic can help you. She's the Resident Assistant. Last door on the right, down the hall." He looked away then, took one step back, and closed the door.

I blinked. *Strange*. In addition to being truly bizarre, the man had an obvious East Coast accent.

On the next door, I knocked more aggressively. This time, a groggy girl as plump as a seal, in a quilted nightgown, opened the door. She goggled at me with frightened, enormous seal eyes. "Who are you?"

I knew I was tired, but I really wondered how bad I looked: people were giving me the strangest reactions. "Helene Connor. Miami."

She looked too timid to be military. "Oh, oh. Yes," she managed in a small voice. "We're glad you're here. You're late. You look exhausted. Let me take you to the guest room."

Before I could ask her any questions about my alleged assignment, she ducked back into her dark room, and returned with a steel ring of keys. "This way. How was your trip?"

"Fine, I suppose."

"Uh, good. Breakfast is at 7:30 A.M. The Board of Directors wants to meet you at 9:30." We walked back down the hall; she stopped before a roughly lacquered door and opened it. "If you want, I'll meet you for breakfast and show you around before then, Dr. Connor."

"Oh, I'm not a doctor," I said wearily, peering into the small room.

The look she gave me was worse than disappointment: it was down right dangerous. "You're not a Doctor," she said in a ghostly whisper.

"I'm a graduate student. I'm working on a Doctorate in cetacean psychology."

I saw that this girl had a complete range of unpleasantness that I hoped never to fathom the depths of. Considering that the moment before, she had actually been frightened of me, our roles had reversed utterly.

"I . . ." the words died in my mouth. I didn't know what was going on. That was a sure thing, now.

She looked furious, but she did nothing other than turn and mince down the hall, barefoot on her solid little feet. I slunk into the room, clicked on the bare light bulb, and glowered at a narrow bed and a desk-chair unit intended for a sixth grader.

This was not going well, not well at all. I glanced at the mirror in the open bathroom. My straw toned hair looked like someone had cut

## Absolute Magnitude

it off and glued it back on my head; weariness had caused welts under my eyes that purpled like bruises. Worse, being out of my environment for three days had murdered my tan.

I dropped my bags to the floor and eased onto the creaking bed, between the folded blankets and an old pillow that had seen fluffier nights. I then pulled a tatter of newspaper out of my windbreaker pocket.

The piece of paper was over twenty years old. I studied the photo, a man figure wrapped up like an Egyptian mummy. It sat in a wheelchair attended by a veritable forest of intravenous drip bags on silver poles. For the thousandth time, I read the accompanying article.

### AP PRESS—SEATTLE

*Today at an international press conference, Albert Perrin-Hill announced that the body of Stephen Bandell, a marine biologist who died a year ago, has been used as a host for the brain of a dolphin who was once one of the deceased biologist's study subjects. Albert Perrin-Hill and his associates at Goose Bay, a small research facility north of Seattle, quickly sidestepped moral objections by explaining that Bandell had died of a brain aneurysm and that the Pacific white-sided dolphin, known only as Subject A17, would have been dead a few days later due to a severe genetic neuromuscular disorder. With equal quickness, the panel assured the audience of journalists, scientists, and politicians that the transplant was a success. Critics of the...*

"It's a hoax," I decided again, for the thousandth time. I turned off the light and curled up on the bed.

**I**ll just tell these people what I think, and then I will be on my way back to Miami.

I had decided to stay in my room until near nine o'clock and then find someone and ask directions. If Rollie came for me, fine, I would go to breakfast with her, but otherwise I would prefer to hide in the room.

No one fetched me for breakfast.

Close to nine, I wandered out. Doors were open. Students meandered in and out. It looked, I noted, very little like a military base, much more now like a university dormitory.

I stopped one of the students and asked where the administrative offices were. Like everyone else in this little alternate universe, he did not answer my questions straight away. "Who are you?"

I was not feeling entirely congenial. "I'm here about Praxitales."

The look on his face was dubious. He turned and shouted down the hall. "Rollie, the girl from MOBI is here!"

I cringed, but straightened my face to obliviousness as Rollie appeared. She wore jeans and a thick sweater that looked like it had wreaths wrapped around it. Her bright blond hair was combed back, her expression polite and formal. Bad, bad news.

"If you'll follow me, Connor."

I wasn't going to grace that with a thanks. I followed her out of the building and into the barren compound. We walked to another long white building, matching each other's strides silently.

She escorted me to an office that felt as bare as blood, even though it was filled with a conglomeration of office equipment—folding chairs, metal desks, battered filing cabinets, cardboard boxes—the floor boards roiled with herds of dust balls. One large window allowed chill light in, and a view of bright white snow and dull white

sky. It held all the ambience of a large janitor's closet, and probably, at one point, had been.

And, in this janitor's closet, behind a long table, sat two women and one man, all wearing blazers and vests. Professors. After years of education, I knew the type.

"Dr. Andrews, this is the woman from MO31," begrudged Rollie. The center professor, an elegant, older woman, brightened. "You must be Helene Connor. Welcome."

"I am. Thank you."

Dr. Andrews gave a beautiful, young smile. "Forgive me for prying, Helene, but you don't look very happy."

"Oh, you're wrong. I'm completely unhappy," I said tersely. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Rollie look at her feet and shift her weight.

"Well, let's talk about this. Sit down, both of you."

"Ma'am?" Questioned Rollie.

The professor's eyes narrowed. Rollie picked up two folding chairs and clunked them down for us. She and I sat down.

Everyone looked at me expectantly. I felt like I was in the principal's office for throwing spit wads. "Is this a military installation?" I asked, nervously.

To my discomfort, the three at the table looked to each other quickly. Then, Dr. Andrews addressed me. "No. It's not. We are privately funded. My name is Alicia Andrews, and I am the Head of Board of Directors, as well as Head Research Scientist. This is Dr. Vince Ray, with Bioengineering, and Dr. Cynth Molera, Marine Science. You've already met Rollie Perrin-Hill; she is our Senior Research Aide."

I smiled like I was facing a firing squad. "You people are serious, then."

The professors, probably not understanding what I meant, beamed quite charitably at me. Rollie fidgeted grumpily in her chair.

"I find it improbable that a cetacean brain could survive in a human body," I added.

I wasn't quite sure what reaction I expected from my announcement, but I knew I wasn't expecting what I got: all four looked at me as if I had just announced that I had reason to believe the world was flat.

"Oh, very few people do, at first"

"You're not serious."

"Don't tell me you came all this way if you thought he was a hoax."

"I didn't have much choice," I answered rawly. I didn't feel like explaining that there had been an accident, a death of a student at the Oceanarium, and that my overseeing Professor had sent all his graduate students to other projects to avoid the backlash of lawsuits that were sure to follow.

"Well... didn't Dr. Gidford give you any of the literature?"

My eyes popped at this. "The only 'literature' I've seen would give the *National Investigator* a run for its money."

I had a briefcaseful of old articles, all of them so carefully non-technical that it seemed obvious that they intended to perpetuate a fake. There was also a novel, *The Shroud of Humanity*, written by a woman whose only other writing credit was entitled *The Loch Ness Monster*. Dr. Gidford wasn't rock solid in his credibility, either; when he had given me my new assignment and the fateful train ticket, he had just finished off a 450-ml beaker of whiskey.

"Besides," I finished, tightly. "Even if it were possible, I wouldn't participate. What you're talking about is sick."

## Praxitales

Rollie almost choked. Andrews raised a hand at her. "It happened over twenty years ago. None of us were here when it was done. We're just taking care of him. He's in a bad way. Are you sure you don't want to even try to offer some sort of insight?"

Rollie couldn't take it anymore. "Dr. Andrews, Dr. Ray, Dr. Molera, I hate to bring this up," the vicious look in her eyes told me that it didn't bother her too much, "but Connor here is only a graduate student, like us. How could she possibly know anything more than the research staff, or any of us?"

Dr. Ray, a greying Hispanic man, interceded. "We don't have many choices left, Rollie. When Praxitales became ill, we sent letters asking for assistance to every academic and medical facility in the country, and no one replied. That was six months ago. This time, we had only two respondents, and this young woman was the more qualified. We'll have to take what we can get."

I wasn't sure I appreciated that.

"But how can an outsider help?" Rollie whined, now. "I've worked with Praxitales my whole life. If he won't talk to me, he won't talk to anyone!"

"He talks?" I asked.

Rollie stood up, hotly. "He walks, he talks, he does card tricks," she said angrily. "You've got less training than me, and less experience. I refuse to take you seriously."

"Rollie..." started Andrews.

Rollie, tears in her eyes, bolted out of the room.

"... Please forgive her, everything will work out," Dr. Andrews seemed upset, but not ruffled. "Her father was on the original project... she's known Praxitales her entire life. She is taking this all very personally."

"He talks?" I asked again, shakily.

"Well, he did," said Dr. Molera, the red haired woman sitting next to Dr. Andrews. "Six months ago, he stopped talking. Just recently, he stopped eating and we have to tube feed him. His health seems fine. We're stumped."

"I see. Can I see him?"

The three professors looked at each other, then at me. It did not make me feel good.

Dr. Molera nodded. "We can arrange that. He's on his morning walk right now."

"He wal—" The only thing that kept me from blurting out my surprise, my disbelief, was that I wanted to impress these people with my 'mere graduate student' intellect. I scrambled for a rational reaction. "Is there anyone with him?"

"Only a monitor-floater. It is customary for him to walk around the bay. He prefers the solitude."

"Uh-huh. I have to see this."

Dr. Andrews stood up, and gestured at the door. "Be our guest. Take the trail north. It will take you to the bay."

You're not in Miami anymore, Toto. I wore a sweater beneath my windbreaker, but it didn't help. Washington state was colder than Florida had been since the last Ice Age. It was also wider than the East Coast had been in two hundred years. Outside the compound, I entered an alien world. The paved path was the only reality I really trusted. The shaggy pines, leafless trunks spined with branches like voodoo dolls, and abstract ice-sculpture drifts of snow made me nervous.

My level of discomfort leveled off when I reached a cretinuous beach formed not of sand, but smooth grey river rocks. Cold waves,

black and frosted with salt under a steel-brushed sky, crashed into the forbidding stone. Shivering in the ice-wind, I studied the Pacific coastline. Like my home waters, I guessed these waters never repeated a day's colors or textures.

I sighed. It was my ocean: there were no walls in the sea. My doctoral work depended on that, and on animals that did not know what barriers were. Unlike humans, who experienced physical barriers, and whose minds were compartmentalized for that reason, I hypothesized that creatures in the open ocean developed a 'barrier-free' psychology, and a different sense of language to explain their world.

Those animals, for me, were dolphins.

Sickly, I remembered why I stood there. *Praxitales. A dolphin who could speak to me. A dolphin in a man's body. A brain transplant between species.*

I scanned the stone beach, necklaced by an ellipse of furry pines. Peeking out from behind the trees, I could see the twittering lights of a security fence.

I'm sorry. It's just too twisted.

I decided to leave, but then hesitated: a red jacketed figure was emerging from behind a tree on the other end of the beach.

A tall, white haired man. The strange fellow I had spoken with the night before. He strolled towards the surging waters.

*I doubt a brain-transplant patient could walk so quickly:* I picked across the rocks, not wanting to twist an ankle, choosing a path with which to intersect him. He reached the edge of beach first, and stopped.

Approaching, I gave a calculated smile. "Hello, again."

"Hello." His bright blue eyes dazzled me, even in the grey, cool sunlight. His words were careful. "Are you one of my new graduate students?"

"No. I was sent here to try and help Praxitales. Do you know where he is?"

"How do you propose to help him?"

No one in Washington state, apparently, was capable of answering a simple question directly. "Hell if I know. I'm just a very ordinary graduate student from Miami. That's been made pretty clear to me."

"Are you sure?" He asked.

"What? That I'm a graduate student, or that everyone around here..." I let the thought drop. The dotty professor no longer looked at me. He had turned towards the grey surf and now scanned it with an intensity that let me know he wasn't just taking in the scenery. He sought something.

I looked out across the wind faceted water. I saw it, then. A dark hooked fin sliced out of the silvery magic that is the ocean, then sank out of sight. I had caught a glimpse of the creature's eye, watching us, masked in silver and white. I knew the species. *Lagenorhynchus obliquidens*, the Pacific white-sided dolphin.

I felt confused. "That's not... Praxitales. Is it?"

"No. That's Mach-no-mach."

There was something wrong with his voice. It sounded thick, unhappy. His face was turned from me, and I could only see the edge of his cheek. I could also see an ancient bruising running down the back of his neck, disappearing into the fur lining his red coat. His shoulders shook.

The man, I realized, was crying. "Sir?"

He didn't answer me. Feeling blisteringly awkward, I looked up at the sky, wishing that I could just fly away. A monitor-floater, an outrageously expensive piece of hardware, floated high in the air,

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directly above us, like a toy-sized U.F.O.

Suddenly, I felt like the victim of a huge galactic practical joke. My chin snapped down, and started to quiver. I stared ferociously at the professor's profile.

Through the white hair, I could see a long pink caterpillar of a scar. "Who is Mach-no-mach?" I whispered, hoarsely. The strange name chewed my tongue.

"Mach-no-mach," said the stranger, slowly, tearfully, "is my wife."

Returning to Dr. Andrews' office, I stopped when a man shouted at me, and turned to see that I was being borne down upon by a pair of men in padded black fatigues.

The first, a tough middle-aged crewcut, cut me off before I could accuse him of anything. "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"I'm..."

"God damn it," muttered the second of the two, a shorter black man.

"Do you have your I.D. badge?" finished my charming interrogator. He glared at me.

"No." Already shaken, and angry for it, I glared back. "No, I was here about Praxitales."

"You don't have a security clearance."

"No..." I looked at the silver bars on his collar. "No, Lieutenant." His face reddened. "I'm a *Captain*. Let's go see Dr. Andrews *right now*."

*I was just on my way, Lieutenant.*

Dr. Andrews looked once at me, once at the men escorting me, and gave a huge smile. "Helene. Gentlemen. Come in. Sit down." She was alone in the janitor's closet office.

We entered. No one sat down.

Captain Roberson began immediately. "We specifically told you not to call for outside consultation."

Andrews' Teflon smile did not waver. "She's not a consultant. She's a graduate student."

Thanks.

"You're not obeying orders."

"I'm not in the military," replied the Head Research Scientist evenly. Firmly.

Roberson's face reddened again, this time into his short porcupine hairline. He scowled at her and then, without further notice, blew out of the barren office. Grimacing professionally, his little companion trailed after him. Andrews' pale eyes were hard and angry, but she blinked herself into gentleness before she would look at me.

"Well," she said.

I frowned. "You lied to me. No matter. Your problem is solved. He's talking. I'm leaving. Bye."

"He talked? What did he say? How did you..."

"We talked for about half an hour, after he stopped crying. He said that his wife, this sweet little porpoise, has been hanging around the bay for him all these years. She's finally dying, and he is grieving."

"Wife? You're kidding..."

"Watch the tape on the monitor-floater," I snapped. I took a deep breath, and did what I really wanted to do: rant. "He's not a science experiment, he's a man. A crazy man. And you people are crazy if you expect me to believe any of this!"

"Wait." Andrews raised a slender hand. "I take it you still entertain

doubts?"

"I may be 'just a graduate student.' But don't think I'm a fool. I did my undergraduate work in Psychobiology. He's *Homo sapiens*. Normal respiration, normal blink response, normal reflexes. He talks slowly, but that's due to his mental condition, not brain damage. He's a man who thinks he's a dolphin and you're letting him do it!" I glared at her. I had been talking so fast I had no spit left in my mouth.

"Please, calm down."

"No, God damn it. What you're suggesting is impossible."

"You think that we set up an elaborate show just to fool you? And Rollie? And everyone else?"

"The eighteenth-century scientific hoax of the Piltwood Man springs to mind. It's not like changing a battery in a car, for God's sake!" It wasn't even the delicate matter of hooking up the nerves of a severed brain to a body again; that technology had existed for over a decade. I had spent three days on the train learning all the reasons why Praxitales had to be a hoax. I had a very long list. "A dolphin brain is larger than a human brain. You would have had to discard portions of it to make it fit the cranium. If..."

I hesitated, and then decided, *do it, let them know what you think*. "Even thinking of doing it is the sickest thing I've ever heard of. If your little Frankenstein had survived, it would have been unabashedly and severely brain damaged!"

"Actually," replied Dr. Andrews, softly, "we shaved the cortex down and removed some of the buffering fat. I can show you the X-rays. The brain also sits at a slight angle in the cranium. It would amaze you."

"And the immune system?" Normal transplants failed often because the body readily recognized what was itself and what was not. In the case of an organ transplant, it was the transplanted organ that recognized the new body as transgressing surroundings and chemically rejected it.

"We bathed the tissues in Q-12. The cell I.D. tag. It allows differing cells to recognize each other and prevents rejections."

"It doesn't work that well. Not between species."

"That's Q-12 *alpha*. Q-12 *beta* worked just fine." Dr. Andrews smiled serenely.

Still glowering, I pulled more facts out of my mental black hat with a flourish. "Just exactly how did you convince one blood type to provide adequate oxygen for a human body and a cetacean brain? Dolphin hemoglobin carries a third more oxygen than human red blood cells!"

Another beautiful smile. "That was the tricky part. We manufactured chimeric blood cells—hybrids of the human and dolphin—and then a rigorous physiological therapy on the body and brain for eight months so that they would work together. Perrin-Hill was a biochemist; he won a Nobel prize for his work." She stopped, and evaluated my sick expression. "Please, Helene, be patient. I'll show you the lab, the notes. I know it's hard to believe, but you'll see."

"No, I won't." I was deeply angry, and I knew that anything Dr. Andrews said, plausible or not, would only serve to infuriate me more. I also knew she was lying, but I held that last trump card mute in my seething heart: I had spent enough days standing in waist high water, shivering in my wet suit and holding ailing dolphins afloat to know that when those precious animals had suffered enough, they simply stopped breathing, and died. Unlike humans, who could breathe if they were unconscious, dolphins only breathed at will. No dolphin would choose to survive the horrific procedure Andrews



## Praxitales

fantasized.

And there was something pathologically wrong with anyone who would expect such a beautifully sentient animal to do so. There was also something psychotic about a facility that would propagate the tale of such an abomination . . . I had just reached the point where I didn't even want to know why.

"No," I growled. "I'm fed up with you people. I'm leaving."

"Really?" asked the good doctor. She held up a silver card. "I'm holding your return train ticket."

**T**hey can make me stay here. They can't make me work. I sat on the scroungy narrow bed, my duffel bag packed by my side.

I had seen enough. These people were not only military, they were fanatical. The students I had seen walked around the installation as if it were holy ground and Praxitales, their deity. The professors? High priest and priestesses, keepers of the sacred alter. Captain Roberson and his little buddy, the temple guards. I felt as if I had inadvertently stumbled into some bizarre myth.

*And what do all myths require? A sacrifice, that's what.*

*I refuse!* Determined to stare at the wall until Andrews released me, I broke my own promise when someone knocked on the door, then opened it.

Rollie pecked in. Her brown seal eyes looked tortured. "You can't leave," she whimpered. "He talked to you."

"I just spent an hour telling your Head Research Scientist why I shouldn't be here. You're crazy if you think I'll listen to you as to why I should stay here."

"Did he say anything else to you?"

I looked out the window at the snow field. I really missed Miami.

"What did he say?"

I sighed. "He said that I looked very pretty. He liked the way my eyes, hair and skin were all the same color. 'A gentle golden woman,' were his exact words, I think."

"He likes to compliment people," Rollie's already swollen eyes filled with tears.

"Rollie," I started carefully. "There's something wrong here. There is no way in the world that something like Praxitales can exist."

"Didn't you see his scars? He talked to you and you don't believe?" Her fire and hatred gone, she sounded hollow and desperate. I felt guilty for disliking her.

"Rollie, this is the strangest thing I've ever heard of. I'm from Miami. That's saying a lot."

"He's dying, and you don't believe in him."

"Rollie . . ." Whatever the truth was, I knew Rollie believed in Praxitales.

She really believed in Praxitales.

"Uh . . ." Suddenly, my windpipe began to ravel up; I could feel my stomach trying to squeeze upwards. "Uh . . ." I ran into my room's little bathroom. I barely made it to the sink. There was nothing in my stomach, but I retched for a good minute.

Grasping the porcelain edge, I saw in the mirror Rollie sitting on my bed, watching me. "I'm sorry," I grated.

"It's okay. Dr. Molera went through the same thing when she first got here. So did Ralphie. You're suffering from paradigm shift."

"What?" My innards began to crawl again. I braced myself.

"Paradigm shift. You're starting to believe what we're telling you and you don't want to so badly, it's making you sick. Your body is rejecting it." She gave a harbor seal's sad smile. "Like an organ transplant."

I shook my head. My stomach threatened to betray me again. "No. No, I don't." I watched her in the mirror. "I can't. You're not the only one whose worked with dolphins all your life, Rollie. I grew up on a research vessel. If Praxitales were genuine, I would have heard of him."

"No, you wouldn't have."

"Why not?" I still held the sink. I tried not to sway.

"There are some things you should understand about Praxitales." She glanced out the window, sadly. "My father said that when Praxitales came out of the coma, the scientific world thought he was a miracle, but when he began to talk, he was considered an abomination."

Warily, I lowered myself down to my knees. Sitting down, I leaned against the cold wall, and stared at Rollie.

Her tears quickly began to flow. "People don't like to hear that they are wrong, Connor. They asked Praxitales what he thought and felt, and he told them. But it wasn't what they thought he should be thinking and feeling, and they blacklisted him for it. The reason you can't find anything out about him is because, twenty years ago, he embarrassed and mocked everyone, showed them they were fools, told them their lives' works were jokes. Everyone's theories were wrong. The media, the scientists, all the icons of research, even Stephen Bandell himself. Everyone."

*The mind of an animal in a human being.* "If a different species could express its views, everyone would want to know what it had to say, I think. I know I would."

Rollie shook her head. "No. That's why we're now a military facility. Nobody else will give us any quarter. The Navy helps us with blood work and all the medical checkups he always needs."

My stomach was beginning to hurt again. "Okay," I groaned. "Say, for argument's sake, I believe you. What did Praxitales say that upset everyone?"

With a ghost of haughtiness, the borrowed confidence of a Nobel Laureate's daughter, Rollie lifted her round chin. "Why don't you ask him?"

**I** didn't go talk to the Amazing Dolphin Man. I called Miami. "Mary, this is Helene. Is Gidford in?"

"Hi, Helene . . . no, he's been unavailable all this week. He hasn't been returning messages either. You know . . . the place is crawling with investigators."

*Fine, talking to that drunken pig wasn't my first choice, anyway.* I balanced the receiver of the old fashioned audio phone on my shoulder. Rollie had given me a lab journal; I held it on my lap and was paging through it. Still very much the skeptic, I now entertained even more questions. Praxitales was doubtfully what these people claimed, but he was something to these people, and I wanted to find out what. I needed help. "Okay, how about Kip?"

"Oh, he's in the Bahamas"

"The Bahamas?"

"Why? Where are you?"

"Gidford sent me to Washington! Washington State! Why in the hell did Kip get . . . forget it." Now, I was really upset. "Is John Paul in? Or did he get an assignment in the French Riviera?"

"Uh, no. Wait. He's over at the University—they put him in an office in the library basement. I'll transfer you, Helene. Hold on."

The ancient telephone line buzzed quietly. *Maybe the science of it would work, but forgive the pun, there's still something fishy about this. Why would it be a secret? Scientists wouldn't reject negative*

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information. Data is data, whether it correlates your theories, or not...

I thought of all the theories that had ever been postulated regarding the mental lives of dolphins. Just about everything had been considered. One researcher in the Seventies, John Lilly, had even hypothesized that dolphins were psychic. At the very least, it had been an excellent excuse to conduct a lot of "experiments" with LSD.

What really bothered me was this: so much had been written on dolphin psychology, many of the papers opposed one another. Praxitales had disproved them all? All of them?

No. Slowly, I began to bang my head on the wall until John Paul, also known as The Pope, also known as The Resident Computer Genius, picked up the line. "Pope!"

"Einstein! How's it going, lady?"

"You wouldn't believe where I am. What's up there?"

"Bad. Donny's wife is suing the Institute. Everyone is running around like they're avoiding snipers."

I remembered Donny. I remembered holding his hands. Tears needed my eyes.

"Helene, you there?"

I pushed the lab manual off my lap, pressed my hand to my face. For the last few days, I had pushed the accident to the back of my mind. I wanted it to stay there. "I need you to pull up some information from those secret files you always brag about."

"What's the name?"

"Praxitales. I'll spell it"

In the background, the key-strokes of the Pope's computer fluttered. "Okay. Hold on. Hmmm. *The Shroud of Humanity*. Book title."

"I'm familiar with it. What else?"

"There's a list of other references. Two names. Stephen P. Bandell and Stephen Praxitales Bandell."

*Praxitales. Bandell's middle name.* A Greek name. I thought then of Greek myths, of dolphins saving drowning sailors. There had been no dolphin to save Donny. The image of Mach-no-mach, grey flanks in black waters, flashed through my mind. *Don't cry.*

"Einstein. Helene." The Pope was trying to get my attention.

"Do the second one."

"Okay. Uh. Shit."

His tone scared me. "What?"

"I've just been tagged by N.I.S. What... Helene, I'll call you back."

The line went dead.

The Pope did not call me back. On Rollic's door, stenciled in thalo blue, was an Egyptian falcon. The Egyptian sun-god, I realized. Ra. R.A. Resident Assistant. Clever. I banged on the door.

Rollic yelled at me to enter.

She was seated at her desk, her head down on her hands.

"Do you cry all the time?" I asked.

She lifted her head, deftly plucked a tissue from a box, and blew her chapped nose. "As of late? Yes."

I slid onto her quilt-covered bed. "What if I told you that your Praxitales is more than a Navy charity case? He's a classified project?"

"No."

"The Naval Intelligence Service has a secured file on him. One of my friends just got busted for touching on it."

"Naval..."

"Naval Intelligence Service. It's the Naval equivalent of the F.B.I." I took a deep breath, because I was familiar with them: my father was a Naval officer. I wondered if John Paul knew how much trouble he was in.

Rollic considered me with solemn brown seal eyes. Then, she blew her nose again, and shook her head. "No. We have a contract with the Navy. They provide us with the facility, and all they do is weekly blood work and exams. Praxitales is ours, not theirs."

"Are you sure?"

Rollic didn't answer me. She reached across her desk and picked up a framed picture of herself, her father, and Praxitales. Quietly, she studied it.

I tried again. "Do you see the results of the blood tests?"

She put the picture down, and stood up.

"Rollic."

Ignoring me, she trundled to the end of the bed, knelt, and withdrew from underneath the bed a heavy set of bolt cutters.

"One of the perks of being the Resident Assistant," she stated, answering my wordless surprise. "Come on. The brass are down at the mess hall."

Rollic donned a knee-length coat, hid the bolt cutters beneath it: nervously, we walked over to the administrative building. It being lunch hour, the white washed barrack was vacant.

There, we entered Captain Roberson's unlocked office. Rollic cut open a combination lock into another room containing filing cabinets. I shook like a diseased willow, not only because we were now felons, but because it had just dawned on me that, with this kind of interest by the government, Praxitales could very well be a legitimate phenomenon.

*That man is a dolphin...*

*If he is, there are things I want to ask him. There are things I need to ask him...*

Rollic pulled open a drawer. "Language." Have you listened to him speak, Connor? Did you notice he mimics any accent he hears? We have no idea how he does it..." She slid the drawer shut.

Handling data, Rollic became excited. I could feel her pride, the honor of a graduate student privileged enough to work on a very respected project.

*Praxitales.* Feeling dizzy, I crouched next to the whispering Resident Assistant.

"He can see in the dark, too. I don't think he knows that we know. It's probably a variation of the sonar." She pulled open another drawer. "No, this isn't it. 'Pulmonary Functions.' He can hold his breath like a dolphin. For up to ten minutes!" She closed it, tried another one. "Hematology."

I glanced at the door. "You know him best. Why would he talk to me?"

Reading an opened file, she didn't answer me at first. Then, in a shakier whisper, "I don't know why. It hurts that he would talk to you, not me. This report doesn't make any sense to me. Does it to you?" She shoved the manila folder into my hands.

*Why would a dolphin speak to me? Me.* I glanced down at the pencil-written records. The blood-gas fractions meant little to my untrained eyes, but...

Stunned realization turned budding awe into puddle water. I flipped through the pages. "He's on a drug regimen. He has been for several months."

"What kind?" Rollic looked terrified.

I checked everything again. Thorazine. Zov-ol. Sodium pentothal.

## Praxitales

A few strains of barbiturates.

K-bel lysergic acid.

"Psychotropic drugs. Really high dosages. They're doping him up with mind-altering substances." With the care one would use in handling a ticking bomb, I replaced the folder, shut the drawer. I took Rollie's bolt cutter, wiped her fingerprints off with my shirt, dropped it behind the cabinets, and wiped fingerprints off the cabinets. I couldn't breathe. "Let's get out of here."

The illustrious Captain Roberson passed us in the chilly compound, as Rollie and I scurried back towards the dorm. Seeing him, it wouldn't have surprised me in the least if he had an implanted shark brain: he looked at me like I was prey. I dropped my eyes, pretended I didn't see the career military man, and wondered what part he and Dr. Andrews played in our little myth. Rollie managed a disturbed silence, until we reached her room.

"They're running experiments on him. Secret experiments!" She quavered. "That's probably why he's been sick!"

I felt like I was going to be sick again, myself. "Some of those drugs are purported psychic enhancers. They might be testing him for extrasensory perception." *They're testing Lilly's theories*, I realized.

Those drugs had other uses, as well. I stopped, thought hard.

Very hard. I remembered something that was critical to animal language studies. "Rollie. How long has Praxitales been here?"

"Almost nineteen years."

"Has he ever been off the grounds?"

She shook her head.

"Have you ever heard of 'captive protocols'?" It's a term used in language tests with animals. When you teach an animal a vocabulary—whether it's a gorilla, a dog, or a dolphin—you never teach them the words they need to know to ask to leave. There's an assumption that if they can't say it, they can't think it. *There's also an assumption that if they could ask to leave, they would.* I bit my lip. As far as I was concerned, 'captive protocols' were the original sin of animal behavior studies. A sin I had committed myself, with my manatees and bottlenoses back in Miami. "Has Praxitales ever asked to leave?"

Rollie shook her head again.

"I take it, he has the language skills to do so."

"His I.Q. is equal to ours. Perhaps higher. He's difficult to test." Her eyes filled with tears. "He reads a lot. Why are they doing this?" *He's never asked to leave.*

"I think they're programming behavior into him. Rollie, is there a glimmer of a chance that Praxitales might be a human induced into thinking he is a dolphin?" I had just eclipsed back to my original accusation, this time with an even better excuse.

Now, for some reason, it made me want to cry.

Rollie was crying, but too shaken to argue with me. "Why would they do something like that? Why would my father do something like that?"

I shrugged, weakly. "It's the military, Rollie. There could be a strategic use for the ability to make people think they are something else. Or for the physiological responses they can manipulate out of him?"

I could see that she did not agree with me, but she nodded, stiffly, and murmured what I was already thinking. "We need outside confirmation."

"We need to get him out of here," I said.

I had been in Washington for less than twenty four hours, and I

had already burglarized an office, accessed classified records, and committed credit card fraud. Now, I was up to kidnapping.

I looked down at my lap. My hand trembled: I still held the corporate credit card Gidford had given me for emergencies. Quickly, I tucked it in my purse. I sat in a rented car. Praxitales was in the passenger seat.

"We're going to Seattle," he beamed, slowly. "I've never been to Seattle."

I looked at him carefully since it was only my third meeting with him. Overjoyed to be in a car, he ran long fingers over every surface as if admiring a Christmas present. His blue eyes glittered, brilliant against the black puffy coat Rollie had dressed him in. Rollie had also braided his long white hair back. I knew why the staff was so devoted to him: he exuded sweetness.

Shyly, he tugged at the seat belt Rollie had strapped over him.

"What is this for?"

"A restraint. For safety."

*I wish you were a dolphin.* He probably was Bandell: Rollie had found a picture for me, of a man twenty years younger, heavier, with short black hair, and a devil-may-care grin. I shuddered, and fired up the car. I was going to take Praxitales to a real hospital to be examined. I was going to end this travesty.

The car had been delivered by the rental company to the main entrance of the Institute. I could see Rollie between the trees; she had disabled the monitor-floater and now acted as look-out. She waved at me to leave.

"You and I have not had a real talk yet, Hel-ene," Praxitales said gently.

"No." The snow-lined dirt road led up to a paved road.

"Life moves, Hel-ene," he began. "I'm glad we're moving. Life is restless. To accommodate the spark of your numbers, you've learned to stay still, but it is maddening. How can you?"

The highway. It looked icy to me. I didn't know how to drive on ice. "Lethargic genes, I guess," I answered off-handedly. My hands sweated, slicking the steering wheel. "Praxitales, listen to me. What I'm about to tell you is very important. You've been a prisoner, and you've been made to think you are one thing when you are really another."

"Another what?"

I was scared. It hurt to breathe. "You are not a dolphin."

"I'm not. I was. Now, I am a man."

"No one would be weird enough to cut up a Pacific white-sided dolphin and put them into a human being. No one would be cruel enough."

"It wasn't cruelty, Hel-ene. Al-bert told me that, once. It was love. They couldn't bear to lose me. They had been dreaming for some way to save me when my host's brain died."

"No. It's crossing the line. It's going too far." *Funny*, I thought, *saying such a thing at the same instant I'm committing a crime.* Praxitales was the property of the Pacific Northwestern Oceanic Institute. I checked my mirrors, again, and caught a rubbery, mocking smile out of the corner of my eye.

"Would you," he asked, "have crossed 'the line' to save Don-ny?"

The entire country knew about the accident at MOBI, but Donny's name had not been released to the public. "Who told you about Donny Marcello?"

His beautiful sapphire eyes sparkled wickedly, but Praxitales didn't answer. Since I was risking my future to save this man, it irritated me. He was toying with me.

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He didn't have the right.

"So," I continued, coldly, "What was it like being a dolphin? What was it like, living in a world without walls?"

He took his own turn at sarcasm. "You've read the literature." *Literature*. Every word was broken down.

Boy, they did a job on him.

"I read the literature." The road was empty behind me, like a pot waiting to boil. "I find it hard to believe that you discounted every theory ever postulated on dolphin behavior."

"I am alive, Hel-ene. I am not definable in words."

"Right," I breathed, disgusted. Houses started to appear in the heavy forests around us, fleas in dog fur. I considered abandoning the highway and working my way up to Seattle on side roads.

"I lied, Hel-ene," said Praxitales, simply.

No, I barely know where I am. I'd just get lost. "Lied? About what?"

"I didn't want them doing to my species what they had done to me." He placed his words as carefully as if laying bricks to build a house. "I didn't want them to hurt Mach-no-mach."

"What are you talking about?"

"I was the ambassador of my race, the representative." *Re-presentative*, with a Miami accent. His voice hitched up. "I needed to insure that they would never take one of us again. I told them everything that would repel them, make them want to leave us alone."

Waiting for the car, Rollied had shown me Praxitales' statements. Apparently, he had purported his species was nasty, vindictive, selfish, bad humored, vicious, inconsiderate, jealous, stupid. It was no surprise to me that the world wouldn't want to hear that: the world didn't want to hear about itself.

He had also laughed at every theory regarding dolphin psychology. I remembered Rollied had told me that, in effect, Praxitales had hurt the feelings of the scientific community, and they no longer wanted to play in his proverbial sand box.

All I wanted to know was how he knew to do that.

"How did you know what to say, Praxitales? How did you know what angered people?"

He did not answer. A police car passed. My heart pounded too hard. I was getting too scared to care about his answer, interesting as it might be, from a psychiatric point of view. I slowed the car. A school of commuters streamed by us.

I'm stopping. I didn't, though. "Why are you telling me this? In fact, you've talked to me since I got here. You wouldn't talk to anyone else for over six months. Why are you even talking to me?"

Those were questions he was willing to answer, it seemed. "You understand. You lost someone the same way I lost Mach-no-mach."

Donny. "No, Rollied's father died. She lost a loved one. She would understand you."

"Al-bert died of cancer, but Rol-lied loved him. He loved her back." His words were slow. "I had to watch Mach-no-mach suffer without me for twenty years. We could not be together, and I could tell no one..."

Donny.

"...and you had to watch Don-ny die, never able to tell him how much you loved him..."

I forgot I was driving. I gaped at the smiling, blue eyed, white haired man.

"You couldn't tell him," finished Praxitales. "He was married."

My jaw dropped. Then, gravel and ice stole the tires of the car, and the vehicle screamed off the road like a roller coaster tearing down

into the steepest dip. That we ended up in a ditch twenty feet below the level of the road did not bother me because I was too busy screaming at Praxitales.

"Bastard! Get out of the car!"

The man, stunned, pulled back from me. He didn't unlatch his seat belt.

Furious, I shrieked more insults at him, but my anger faded dead away when I realized he was bleeding. The thin, bruised skin on the back of his neck had broken open. Praxitales was injured.

Injured, and frightened to death of me.

My heart rended, and I wanted to weep, but I remembered that I was responsible for him, now. "Oh, God. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Praxitales, I'll take care of you." My own sob interrupted me, surprising me. "I won't hurt you again."

In the distance, the faint twee of sirens commenced. Trembling sickly, I hoped someone had seen us go off the road, and had called an ambulance.

Or the police.

At this point, it did not really matter. Slowly, I reached out to the trembling man, gently stroked his arm to reassure him. "We're going to finish this, once and for all," I whispered.

66 **H**e needs a CT scan. He hit his head," I had lost count of how many times I had said that.

"We know, lady. Climb out," said one of the paramedics, a little wearily.

I stumbled away from the ambulance, and watched them pull out the gurney. Praxitales had panicked in the coffin interior of the ambulance, and they had forced him into restraints. After that, he had stopped screaming, and had squeezed his eyes shut.

And stopped breathing.

I had thought the worst day of my life had been when Donny had drowned in the experimental Biosuit—with the staff, an invited audience, and the media present—in the gorgeous Coral Reef Room of the Miami Oceanarium and Bathypelagic Institute. Donny Marcello had drowned while all of us watched, the clear plastic ballooned around his head like a crystal ball determining his fate on the spot.

I was wrong. The paramedics had thought me insane, whispering desperately into the ear of a bleeding man who was having CPR performed on him. When Praxitales finally relented and took a breath, I had been so sick I vomited bile.

Watching the gurney disappear behind steel swinging doors, I just barely made it to a chair in the waiting room. I desperately hoped a CT scan would prove that he was only a man, a man whose brain did not sit at an angle in his head.

A man who could read in the dark, hold his breath for four minutes, shadow my accent, and tell secrets that had never been breathed to a soul.

He had squealed when the paramedics had first grabbed him. That sound had been urgently familiar to me, I had heard it many times, as an undergraduate, working with the University's Whale Rescue Program.

Shakily, I rose and pushed through the doors. After surprising several emergency patients, I found him on a back bed closed off from the world by a green curtain. Still in restraints, he lay quietly, eyes closed, taking his slow, deep breaths. I watched him for a few minutes.

"Praxitales."



by NIKOL

with Hester

Denise Lopes Heald's work has appeared in *Pirate Writings* and *Aboriginal*, and her book *Mistwalker* was a Del Rey Discovery novel. This is third appearance in **absolute Magnitude**.

## Liady Niady

by Denise Lopes Heald

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Raindrops pattered on Lady Nia's head and flooded pain down her spine. Twisting, she angled her eyes toward the thinning cloud cover. The storm was dying. So was she. But a beam of sunlight broke through the clouds, blinding her with phantom warmth, the slant of the light betraying night's nearness.

Down the mountain, she faced darkness creeping up past the tree line, eating the edges of the stone stubbled scrub that surrounded the crash site. Now what? Nothing from the charred wreckage of the aerial offered any shelter.

Aching and nauseous, she pushed slowly erect from her rock perch, carefully, carefully balancing her skewed head against the tug of spasmed neck muscles. With minute twists and stretches, she tested the limits of her pain. Moving helped. But her hair dripped, and the wind picked up. Chill gusted through the bloody tears in her tunic, mocking her expensive thermals.

The peasant passengers, in their cheap iron-sturdy overalls, were likely warmer now than she was. Muscles bunching tighter, she shivered, and the chill brought tears to her eyes.

She *wouldn't* ask for help, wouldn't give the others the satisfaction of denying her anything. That much pride she possessed. But the rest she abandoned, dropped on hands and knees in the thin, damp grass and arched her back in a vain attempt to find some release from the pain.

Everything else she could survive: the ignorant peasants' refusal to retrieve her luggage, their subsequent shunning of her, even the pile of corpses hidden beneath a cargo sheet against one of the transport's broken wings. But she didn't know if she could survive the pain. It kept her from thinking and managing, doing those things necessary to stay alive through a cold night on the face of a wilderness mountainside. Tears dripped in the mud. Why wouldn't someone find her things for her? Couldn't the idiots understand that she didn't care about her jewelry, but they all needed her furs and thermals for warmth?

A hand settled on her hip. She startled, but froze again as pain exploded from the too sudden movement, seared up her jaw, and set her eye twitching. She hadn't heard anyone approach. Gods, she was vulnerable.

A second hand joined the one on her hip, both hands blessedly warm. Broad thumbs found the hollow at the base of her spine and began to knead rigid muscle. She moaned, melting downward, and a thick thigh slid under her shoulders, keeping her face from the mud. She curled wordlessly over it, rewarded at last by the easing of pain.

*Get out of the mud. Have some pride.*

But a man's soft voice said, "Rest." And his hands stirred gently, massaging upward to her knotted shoulder muscles.

She whimpered, another layer of pride shed, all her senses focused on his fingers, which went up her neck to the base of her skull and down again. As she relaxed, he eased her slowly onto his lap, his body

warm against hers—his touch purest mercy.

When she dared at last to move, she looked carefully up, expecting to see one of the aerial's flight crew. He wasn't—

Her neck resapsed. Her stomach chilled. Her chest cramped. She lay on his armored knee, forcing herself to breathe. She hadn't even felt that armor. *Wake up, woman.*

"Stop!" The word escaped her throat in a ragged squawk.

The hands stilled, but she sensed by the raised angle of his arms that the creature awaited her further decision.

*A mercenary.* Why couldn't it be someone tolerable? Not an alien import, a killer to safe-keep Nickel Town's mines or guard the garish mansions of the new ill-bred lords who ruled the district. At least the mine owners were sly enough not to trust the loyalty of their own people. *Go away,* she wanted to scream to this monster. She hated the new lords. And she hated their army of hired bandits—the miners' pretense at independence, even while they quaked in their fancy new beds afraid the Chancellory and Charter Families, backed by the Guard, would make them pay their own way for a change. *Gods, an alien.*

She remembered seeing the mercenaries after the flyer's crash. They'd been pulling bodies from the wreckage. In her shock, she'd forgotten them. They must have been riding cargo.

How dare he touch her. She wasn't dead. But pain and cold sapped her strength, and this thing—this creature—was *warm*. She wanted his hands back—pure, base weakness.

Going to die. A sob escaped her.

His hands settled on her back again and slid about her ribs so that his body sheltered her from the wind. Her throat constricted. Her stomach knotted. His strange rank odor threatened to strangle her. She choked down tears and outrage and lay still. When alien fingers started on her muscles again, she let it happen, burrowing into his side, chasing warmth.

Darkness fell.

The wind picked up. The alien tugged her behind the boulder she had been sitting on earlier. The rock's mass blocked the gusts and gave him something to put his back against so he could hold her in his lap. Lifting her from the chill, wet ground, he arranged her body over his.

Why did he help her? Reflection revealed no comforting answers. She shivered.

"Eat?" He dug a rations tube from a belt pack.

Her stomach fluttered. "I'll try."

The tube's contents looked like mud, but she couldn't risk offending him. He could kill her here in the storm and the night, and no one would know. She would be just another casualty. Instead, he passed the tube of slimy nutri-slurp, and when she tasted it, she thought dying might be better than swallowing. But she managed to down a mouthful before shoving the feed tube back into his hand.

## Absolute Magnitude

"It will help keep you warm." He offered the tube back. To escape, she hid against his stinking shoulder. "Of course," he said.

The sound of his swallowing as he consumed his meal made her ill; at least he finished quickly. He tossed the tube somewhere into the night, and turned to fuss at his side. "Sit up." He spoke with no courtesy at all.

She gritted her teeth, resenting his tone less than that he dared disturb her hard-won moment of numbness. But, too tired and frightened to fight, she simply obeyed, shivering while he keyed a wrist lamp, opened his armored vest, and stripped the liner from it. Redonning the armor, he pulled her inside of it as best he could and spread the liner over her upper body.

His light faded. Above, clouds scudded and roiled, hiding whole patches of stars. Huddled beneath the warmth of his liner and sheltered by his arms, she was almost comfortable. Couldn't he have thought of the liner sooner?

Maybe not. Intelligence wasn't a mercenary's primary qualification. Nor royalty's either, she supposed with more honesty. She certainly *felt* stupid, sitting in the dark and the wet, victim to this creature's whim, too weak to help herself.

Damn him.

Someone moaned in the dark. Someone else stirred and grunted, the wind rattling and whining through the bushes, a ghostly mimic.

Stupid...

Stupidity would kill her, just as it threatened to kill the Charter Families, break up the old power. They hadn't the intelligence to even know they were failing. The peasants and the new bourgeois hated them. She cautioned in Council not to trust old loyalties. There *wasn't* loyalty anymore. Money counted more than blood, especially at a commoner's level. But few listened to her.

Stupid...

She was stupid to have run at her husband's first cry for help. Couldn't he handle his own post? Everything was falling apart. Stupid—stupid and lazy. But she didn't know if she meant Navrat, herself, or the system. Damn him.

Still freezing, she rooted after the alien's body heat and ignored the reek of spoiling blood. Obviously, he'd been hauling dead bodies before rescuing her. Damn them. She twisted and turned, seeking just *one* position to ease her spastic neck.

"Hush." His fingers found the hollows of her neck again.

Her muscles warmed. Pain eased. Misery faded into oblivion.

When she woke, clouds rode below the mountaintop, an ocean of gray hiding all the world beyond. On their island, pale dawn revealed her benefactor clearly for the first time. Asleep, he lay slack, his helmeted head rocked back against the boulder, his lips puffing a ring of steam inside the ragged edges of his shattered face plate. Bloody nicks pocked his cheek, and one eye had ballooned into a blackened, crusty blob.

What a savior. But why had he helped her at all, put up with her through the night? In his armor, he could have stayed warm enough on his own. Maybe he recognized her status and hoped for reward from her family. Or did he want more from her than warmth and money?

She should kill him, erase the threat... except she hadn't a weapon and wouldn't chance stealing one of his.

Easing from beneath his arm, she wrapped his vest liner over her shoulders and slipped around the rock. She should leave the liner—it

only gave him cause to come after her. But she would freeze without it. Already her arms felt numb, and her teeth clicked.

She looked for some vantage that would put a legitimate distance between her and the mercenary. Three more of his kind huddled together under a scrap of wreckage near the body pile. She'd have to avoid them. The other passengers slept in scattered knots, although common sense dictated that *the bigger the pile, the warmer the pile*. Not a particularly trustful lot here—which didn't speak well for anyone's survival.

Yet, she thought of going to them—the night having taken the edge off her pride—but decided that as she'd advised the Council, she couldn't trust the peasants. And if the aerial's surviving crew members had intended to show her courtesy, they would have long since.

In this company, class and rank were poor protection. Keeping to herself was still safest. But as she wavered, undecided, a grunt sounded from behind the rock, and the alien sood, catching her in guilty confusion.

"Lady?"

"Necessity calls." Fear threatened her control, making her excuse only half a lie.

He nodded, crawled onto the rock and hugged his knees to his chin. "I'll watch for ringers." His words slurred oddly together sounding like, *Alwa'ch fring'ers. Stair I'kins'e u.* "Stay where I can see you."

Her mouth half opened as she bristled at the order. But then, she realized she'd been stupid again, hadn't given a thought to natural dangers, wouldn't have slept at all last night if she had. A casual bat of a ringer's saber-clawed paw would disembowel her.

Shivering, she nodded to the alien. But it took more nerve to walk away from him now, and it galled her to feel so ignorant, so vulnerable. If only her idiot, too eager Guard hadn't gotten killed during the food riots, she wouldn't be in this position. *Damn him*, she thought with a pang. *Damn you, Tam*. She'd gone shopping that day against his advice... Why didn't the damn Contie Family keep its workers fed?

She found a bush for privacy, checked the alien's angle of view and decided before hiking her skirt that he could watch her without seeing anything too personal. Turning her back to the brush and rock, she squatted awkwardly. The last time she had relieved herself in the presence of nature she'd been four. Now, the whole process proved ridiculous, more so because her canted head kept tugging her off balance. She ended with urine on her shoe, worse on her hands, and then—busy wiping her fingers desperately through a bit of stunted grass—she looked up to see the alien walking toward her.

Now it comes, she thought, stomach startling, legs still slightly spraddled. *No one will stop him*. No one could see them. The rock against which they'd slept blocked the other survivors' view even if any were awake.

Pain-pounded spots in her vision. She stood, straightened her skirts, and faced him.

He drew his weapon—a sleek, fist-shaped hand charger, the type that fired lethal electric blasts only. Her teeth chattered.

He stopped in front of her, his uninjured, oddly slanted eye surveying her body. She thought of screaming, but refused to lose any more self-respect.

He leaned towards her, weapon still raised. "My turn." He reversed the charger and shoved its butt into her hand.

## Liady Niady

Cold shock paralyzed her fingers. She fumbled. The weapon sank toward the ground.

"Careful!" He brushed past her. "Liady'll break a toe, Princess. It's not a parlor stunner."

She spun at that, infuriated and baited. But he moved behind the bush, opening his armor, and she retreated—slipped and shivered her way onto their boulder and waited, her anger sapped by dawn chill.

He finished quickly, obviously more at ease with primitive conditions than a Charter Council Minister. Still, when he stood facing her again, he shivered too.

*Kill him*, she thought. But she only stared, analyzing the whole of him, the charger heavy in her hand. *Kill him*. But as he'd cautioned her, the charger wasn't a parlor stunner, and she wondered if she could fire it. Put her on a Chancellory committee, in a Council meeting, in front of a ledger screen, and no one bested her. But out here, she was too ignorant, was going to die without his help.

She let her breath out slowly, still studying his tall, solid body. It seemed strange that he should have such a gentle touch. She bit her lip and padded the stone where she sat.

He slid up and perched at her side. When the breeze puffed from him to her, she cringed, but remained silent.

"Won't warm 'uch today." He glanced upwards.

She followed his gaze to the cloud roiled sky. When he held his armor open, she held her breath and crawled inside. He hadn't hurt her yet and he was warm.

Her head settled on his shoulder. The pain eased in her neck. He wrapped his arms around her back and that felt good too. With a sinking sense of her own absurdity, she realized that if he wanted her body, there had been ample opportunity through the long night.

So . . . If it was reward he wanted, she would see he that he was paid—just so long as she survived.

Would he make a tolerable bodyguard? But aliens weren't allowed on the Chancellory grounds. She couldn't take him to work. . . . She must be hallucinating to even think it.

Morning wore on, slowly lightening, but never getting bright. He dug out another ration tube, and this time she shared it, swallowing quickly between gulps of water. Catching him watching her, she fought down indignation at his knowing, superior expression. He enjoyed having her at a disadvantage.

He'd learn, she thought. And assuming more confidence than she felt, she glanced at the other aliens still sitting beside the body dump. A mercenary's life on this planet was worse than slavery and these looked to have found hell. Blood leaked from beneath the armor of two of the aliens. She wondered how they had survived the crash at all, riding cargo.

"Why aren't you with them?" She nodded over her shoulder, cursing her boldness, knowing she was a fool to begin any conversation with this man.

His mouth tensed. He glanced away. "They pick a lousy spot o' park."

Some internal dispute, then, she thought.

He blinked. "Done that?"

She glanced at the ration tube in her hand.

"Yes. Eat it. I don't know how anyone can."

"Know by 'mor'ow." He took the thing and sucked it empty.

*Tomorrow?* Her breathing faltered at the thought, and when he tugged her near, she settled into his arms with numbing panic.

Surely, they'd be rescued today?

Morning turned to full day. Some of the survivors braved the wreckage, scavenged scraps of unmeted plastene to build crude shelters. Below the mists thinned, but above the sky roiled, and the wind whipped up, threatening more rain.

No rescuers came.

The day grew chillier. Were it winter, they'd long since be dead, and when the mercenary left her alone on the rock to tend his needs, she shivered and cursed—cursed harder when he finally emerged from behind his chosen bush and wandered downhill, leaving her still at the wind's mercy.

Where was he going? Panic knotted her stomach as he worked farther downslope, gathering an armload of browse. What was he doing? The flight crew had tried to light a fire earlier, but only succeeded in blanketing them all in a pall of smoke. She watched the alien's limping progress and chewed her nails.

What if he didn't come back? He hadn't even left her a weapon this time. But why should he? He was the one who knew how to use the thing, needed it most.

*Or did he?* Did ringers live in these mountains? She didn't know. Perhaps this morning he'd only been trying to scare her, keep her from running. But why? She'd been more trouble than she was worth to him already.

Had handing her the charger been a test? Or a demonstration that he was willing to trust her? Both? He'd probably secured the weapon, so she *couldn't* have shot him—intentionally or otherwise. She chewed her lip, thinking she should have figured that out sooner. Or maybe she was wrong.

Gods help her, she was losing her wits.

He turned uphill again. "Al'right 'Liady?" He dropped his bristling bundle beside their rock.

"Yes."

"Good. Give me a bit. Should of done this sooner."

He picked up a large bow from his gathering pile, stuck it butt down into the mud on the lee side of their boulder, then continued until he'd built a full circle of sticks. Binding the tops together with cord from one of his belt pouches, he layered smaller bows over the sides and finished the crude hut with clumps of soil cut from the ground with his power knife.

"There. Liadies first." He waved towards a gap in the brush.

He must be joking. It looked ludicrous.

But a raindrop splattered her cheek. She looked up, caught a second drop in the eye and slid off the rock into his arms.

As he eased her to the ground, she noted belatedly that he had scrubbed his armor, vain attempt at presentability. No wonder he'd taken so long behind that bush. But he did smell better for the effort, a true relief.

Squatting, she ducked into the hut, and the wind vanished. *Oh, thank you.*

Shaggy bark and spiky twigs hung from the roof and bristled from the walls, but nothing in a long time had seemed quite so wondrous as that tiny hovel. She even decided, with a certain smug satisfaction, that the structure was quite superior to anything she had seen the others cobbling together.

Almost warm with wind and rain deflected, she huddled to one side as the alien slid in behind her, shed his helmet, and shook out a startling mane of golden hair.

Her heart thumped, and her mouth slipped open as it finally struck her that beneath his armor he was quite human—might even, she thought, under other circumstances be attractive.



## Absolute Magnitude

She stared. But he settled on his side without a glance to her, and his breathing deepened. His broad shoulders slumped against her hip. He shivered and went slack.

Fates help her.

She stared... marveled at his muscle, his heavy frame nothing like Navrat's lithe, sophisticated body. Her consort couldn't survive a single night under these conditions. She couldn't survive another one. Everything was too uncouth. Navrat *wouldn't*...

But thinking on Navrat heightened her sense of unreality. She tried to concentrate on something else. How could she, daughter of the Lord Chancellor of Barons, descended of the Charter Families, Minister of the Council, be here in the mud, tattered and filthy, hungry and battered, at the mercy of an alien barbarian? Insanity.

And it was Navrat's fault. He had sent such an urgently peremptory message that she'd imagined all kinds of disaster. Something in Nickel Town had him scared. Something political of course, but he hadn't explained. On his own, she'd feared he would make some egotistical error, begin another riot or worse.

Now she paid the price for her impulsive response.

She should at least have stayed at the Chancellory long enough for the Barons' Cotillion. Her mind spun, captivated by the thought of dining and dancing. Damn Navrat and his power hungry family. Damn her father for catering to the DiRosses, marrying her to them, depending on her to clean up after the morons. She'd caught the first flight headed for Nickel Town—a *common carrier*.

She hoped Navrat managed to handle his own emergency, because she wasn't going to be there. And gods, it was all so intolerable.

"Uuunnnhhhh."

The alien stirred, breaking her mental tantrum, and she held her breath, hoping he wouldn't wake, unwilling to face him across such a tiny space.

He settled again. She lay twisted, searching for that one best position for her neck, finally rooting against his side.

He startled. "Noooooo." His body slammed their fragile shelter and one leg shot out, pinning her against the mud floor.

Her breath stopped. Falling leaves skittered over her face, and in growing darkness, she had just sense enough to key her wrist flash. Light flooded the hut. The alien froze. She cringed.

"Cybel?" His voice quavered.

"No."

"Aaahhh."

He shook himself, came back to the moment, wide-eyed and breathing hard, face contorted. Lifting his leg off her, he drew it to his chest and ducked his head beneath crossed arms, his breath escaping in sighs.

She didn't know what to do—hadn't given a thought to his hurt. What was this one disaster compared to his entire doltish life? But she couldn't escape his pain, finally brushed his fingertips with hers.

He shivered, peeked from beneath his arms. "My apologies to you, Lady. A nightmare." And this time, his words emerged precise, oddly accented, but in perfect high speech.

The *bastard*—hiding behind pidgin patois, playing the idiot to her. Did all the damn peasants hide? Play royalty the fool? So he wasn't doltish. Everything she'd thought this long day, she had to repent. She hated it.

But he sat there, not defenseless, just so very vulnerable. What did he want with her?

"I didn't mean to startle you." She hated apologizing, but refused to be the lesser-mannered in this exchange.

"Not your fault. Mine. Thank you for understanding."

*Understanding?* She didn't understand anything.

He raised his head, wiped at his good eye and lay back on the hard damp ground without another word. One big arm dropped across his forehead, and his shoulders rose and fell with the faintest of shudders.

"You should tend your face."

"I can't see it." His answer came muffled and weary.

"I can." She regretted her words instantly.

But he turned on his back, offering up his face, and she was trapped.

"I've a k-cloth in my belt." Stalling, she dug through the meager personal effects still left her, thinking, *just do it. Don't think.*

She found the sterile cloth, spread it open and faced his wounds. She hated blood—especially old, crusted, dirty blood. Swallowing hard, she dabbed at his cheek. If it hurt him, he didn't show it, lay limp, good eye closed, the other swollen so taut it felt like bone when she touched it. Worse, beneath her fingers, his face burned with fever, and puss oozed from his eyebrow. No wonder he stank, infection eating at him.

He could die, die and leave her alone. Damn it. The wounds weren't deep, but they hadn't been cleaned. He couldn't see to do it. The other passengers hadn't helped him—he being alien. The other mercenaries hadn't... for whatever reason. And she... hadn't.

"Are you in terrible pain?" she asked at last.

"No."

He lied.

"They'll come tomorrow." Strangely, she wanted to comfort him.

"My husband will turn out Nickel Town for me."

"Good." His eye closed and he slipped away.

She held him after that, though she doubted he was aware of it, suffering concern that would have been of more profit had it come to her earlier. The water—which she'd drunk previously without a thought to its source—gave out during the night, and she hadn't even fluids with which to combat his fever.

The idiot. Having shared with her, his generosity would kill him, the same way honest peasants stayed poor, lacking the common sense to be greedy. But this once, her thoughts stamed her, which they would be after a day ago.

At dawn, she woke with thrumming in her ears.  
*Rescue.*

She untangled herself from his slack body and crawled into another grey morn, and while she stood lost in unreality, six aeriels and two tankers descended from the sky, groined, and spewed out their crews.

*Saved.*

A rustling drew her attention from the immaculate uniforms of the rescuing Charter Guards to the torn, dirty alien crawling from the shelter. He sat with his head cocked, straining to see what was happening.

"Were right, Liady," he said. "Go on. They've come for you."

Her mind stumbled. He *dismissed* her?

But then she thought how she looked—if Guards saw her this moment—hoked up in a burrow with an alien. She turned and started away.

"I'll see you get your reward," she said, back to him.

"No."

She turned, but he was already limping away.

## Liady Niady

The Guards greeted her with due respect and consideration. Financed by the Council and half of them bred of Charter Families, *their* loyalty was beyond doubt. The Captain brought her blankets, medicines, food, water, k-cloths. She used the latter by the handful, scrubbing desperately at mud, filth and alien blood. Finally, they urged her toward an aerial—she its only passenger.

At the hatch she stopped, turned and looked back at the charred and torn mountainside. An alien—*her* alien—squatting alongside the wrecked aerial's body pile, reached beneath the cargo sheet, and tugged.

Her throat constricted. A corpse emerged, stiff and bulky in armor. Her stomach lurched upward. Her lungs froze. The body's helmet dropped off, and a woman's long, pale hair fluttered free in the breeze.

They stopped him as he tried to lift her.  
"Liady? Please." A guard urged her to move.

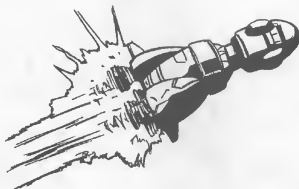
But she waited while they took his dead woman gently from him, gently bundled the body, and wrapped him in thermals as his legs finally failed.

Perhaps she would have done something, gone to him, returned some of his kindness, if they hadn't been so caring. But as it was, she only watched until they loaded him on a crowded aerial and began to lift.

"Councilor?" the Captain said.

She stared down, ignoring him, seeing bloody torn nails and dirt ground into the flesh of her hands. Was she soiled royalty hidden beneath the muck or was she a peasant come into her own?

"Take me back to the city."  
"But Lord DiRoss is waiting for you in Nickel Town."  
"I dearly doubt that, sir." She shook her head. "I think, I am no one he would recognize."



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Shariann Lewitt is a third-generation Manhattanite. She did not leave The City until she began her graduate studies at Yale. She has eight books in print, including her most recent, *Memento Mori*. *Interface Masque* will be a Tor hardcover in 1997.

## Interface Masque—Part I

by Shariann Lewitt

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### CHAPTER ONE

The alto sax cries sweetly just before dawn. Music blankets the streets like soft snow, tucking the downwarren in for sleep. Telling the last stragglers of the night it's time to go home, to leave an empty space before the beginning of the day. To leave a place for the music, for the old slow Delta blues that creep into the cracks in the pavement, into the cracks of the soul.

The music is alone in the dark. Melody drifts through open windows and into dreams. An improv line rides the magnetic index of the night, dancing syncopated against the steady rhythm of the databeam.

Nothing is left untouched by one heartbreak-pretty song. And then the sky fades to blue as the last notes taper away.

The blind jazzman packs up the sax and melts into the rhythms that will carry the city through the day along with the memory of the tune.

Cecilie didn't know how she was going to eat dinner, and then her mother would notice and maybe she would get caught. Or maybe she would tell and her parents would pull her apprentice agreement from Sept-Fortune. Then she would have to find some other thing to do, to learn, to make up for the fifty work-blocks a month that her parents collected from her apprentice pay. That would be the end of the world, Cecilie thought. But she sat still, as still as the lace curtains and the matching lace tablecloth, her face as white as the starched napkin in her lap.

Dinner smelled good. Her mother settled a bowl of roasted peppers and eggplant in the middle of the table next to the pasta. And in the kitchen waited thin-sliced veal in lemon butter and salad and pears.

Cecilie was hungry and not hungry. Her stomach had churned so badly during the day that she could hardly face dinner. Her mother sat down and her father poured the wine. Bowls passed to her and she spooned fragrant food onto her plate and stared at it. But she didn't know how she was going to eat.

Or if she was going to do what was ordered. The thing that was unthinkable and yet she had been told today that it was the only route to her promotion. She didn't know if she was going to have to tell them or if she was going to die inside.

Suddenly she understood about Lucia now. Lucia had been two years ahead of her at Sept-Fortune. When Cecilie had turned sixteen and become a full apprentice Lucia had been up for senior and very excited. Senior apprentices got real jobs and much more pay and were allowed to wear whatever they liked to the Sept-House.

Then and now, Cecilie utterly loathed the plain grey skirt and white blouse and the navy blue blazer that was the uniform for apprentices at Sept-Fortune. At least when she was sixteen she had

been permitted to abandon the childish navy blue knee socks and flat shoes, so now she wore proper hose and low navy pumps.

While the uniform was hideous and humiliating, what was worse was that they were not to go masked while they wore it. Only freshly scrubbed faces revealed to the street, to any passing stranger who looked at them and studied their school-girl features.

Lucia had been so excited, Cecilie remembered. They had gone shopping for new clothes at the expensive shops where Sept credit went a long way. And Lucia had bought a mask, a real grown-up mask of rose-bronze watered silk with a gold filigree pattern on one cheek.

Cecilie remembered the day Lucia had gone crazy, had run shrieking out into the courtyard and her mother had to be called from work in the middle of the day. And even Lucia's mother could do nothing at all and had begun to cry and wring her hands. The ambulance had come and Lucia had been caught and tied and sedated and taken away. No one knew anything about her.

The younger girls in Cecilie's year had wanted to send her flowers or candy. Cecilie had always been the brave one and she had asked Signora Tima if they could visit and perhaps cheer Lucia up. And when was she coming back.

Even now Cecilie could recall the perfect stillness in the room, the heavy scent of furniture polish mixed with dying cream-colored roses stuck in a glass vase on the Signora's desk. "I'm afraid that won't be possible," Signora Tima had said gently but firmly. "Lucia is not at home. She's in Santa Clara's. The nuns say it is stress that broke her, and it is best if she is not reminded of the demands of her time here."

Cecilie had nodded, wondering what kind of sudden stress could make Lucia lose her mind. Only the most hopeless cases went to Santa Clara's. That must mean even her own family could not keep her at home and sane. It was terrible.

And now Cecilie knew the reason and she could feel it tearing her apart inside. She envied Lucia. Being crazy was much better than having to make this choice, do what Signora Tima had insisted was merely a test.

She had sat in the same ivory moire chair that she had when she had inquired about Lucia. This time the roses were pale peach and not quite full-blown. The top of Signora's desk was a brilliantly polished expanse of rosewood that shimmered like satin and was inlaid around the edges with something lighter.

Signora had kept her waiting. It was late afternoon, almost time to go home, by the time Signora got to her. Cecilie concentrated on sitting respectfully, her ankles crossed, her back straight and not leaning on the chair. She had waited nearly an hour and was scared and curious at the same time.

Maybe Signora was going to throw her out. Maybe her latest work was not acceptable. Maybe one of the girls had told about how she

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had acted at the Sept-San Marco party last week and had played with the two most appealing young men there.

Or maybe this was the summons she had been waiting for, that she was to become a senior apprentice and get to wear her own clothes and chose her own jobs from the approved list on the board. Secretly she hoped this was true. That would mean she was the first of her year. While Julietta and Valentina were her dear friends, she would be very pleased to make senior first.

Finally Signora Tina came in from her private inner office and sat down behind the desk. "Cecilie, your work has been excellent to this point, your tutors have all recommended that you are ready to test for senior apprentice status."

Cecilie couldn't keep the smile from spreading across her face. "Thank you, Signora."

The head of the student program nodded in acknowledgement. And then Signora Tina's face became impassive. "The test itself, though, is not an easy thing. You know how we completed the security contract for the Bank of North America last year. You are to break into that system, to get through our own key codes, and bring out the names of the bank's principals and their ownership percentages."

Cecilie could not believe she had heard this. This was not possible. To break security—especially security that Sept-Fortune had created! That was immoral. It was evil. She had been taught above all things that the Septs insured that the security of the business sector remained inviolate. That the power of the Septs rested only on how well they could perform this function.

To break security? No! Cecilie unfolded her hands and steadied herself against the edge of the desk. Maybe it was a test.

"I wouldn't break security," she said firmly. "It's against everything the Sept, my family and society have ever taught me."

Cecilie expected to see Signora's face soften. Surely the older woman was going to praise her fine sense of duty and explain that *that* was what the test had been all about.

It didn't happen. Signora sighed and leaned back in her silk-covered chair. "Cecilie, you must understand that this isn't really breaking security as you might interpret it. This is a test of our own system, how we've put it into place, how good a job we've done for the client. This hurts the client in no way. The bank will never know that you've breached the key. But we need to test our own work, and we need to test your ingenuity and expertise."

The bank will never know, Cecilie thought, unless I fail. Then I'll set off every tracer the design team loaded and I'll be put on trial and the Sept . . .

She looked at Signora's face again and knew the answer. The Sept would not acknowledge her. Ever. If she screwed up she went down solo. If she got in and out and brought the proof demanded, the Sept would have an audit trail on her anyway. All her life they would own her, could call into account the proof of her activity and have her licenses pulled and perhaps get her thrown in jail.

No wonder Lucia had gone crazy. For a moment Santa Clara's was a very tempting thought. No more decisions, no more pain. Just quiet nuns and white walls and drugs to freeze the thoughts that made this life abomination.

Up until this exact moment she had always thought she wanted to belong to Sept-Fortune. What better life could she have? On top of work that consumed her there was the prestige and wealth that went with one of the most powerful Septs on the island. And there was the Sept-House itself, a beautiful palazzo with silk on all the walls and

hand-made carpets on the tiled floors. When she passed her Mastery in the Sept she would even have an apartment here, six rooms all to herself and much nicer than anything she could possibly afford in the city alone.

If she chose to stay in Venice, of course. Her parents had only permitted her to apply to the Septs that had student programs in Venice, and while Sept-Fortune had houses around the world, there were only apprentice programs here and in the Vancouver house. Though sometimes Cecilie thought about taking some exotic assignments in the Fortune Houses in Singapore, or Bombay or maybe São Paulo. Many of the younger members went from location to location for several years, until they were ready to settle down. The thought excited Cecilie. There were so many possibilities open in the future. As long as the future was Sept-Fortune.

Everything, everything was tied in to her career here. She was eighteen—too old to apprentice other places and suspect besides. At her age she should have a skill or be in university. Otherwise she had nothing at all.

The old bell from the top of the Pietà building rang seven and the choir, the oldest and most notable in the city, began their final evening song. Tonight it was Bach, something cool and complex to close down the day.

Signora shook her head and closed her eyes. "You may have until tomorrow to decide, Cecilie. Do not bother to return unless you are ready to take this test. Unless you are ready to make a true commitment to us." And with a wave of the old woman's hand she was dismissed.

She hadn't felt like chattering with Julietta and Valentina, down at the stairs where the vaporetos stopped every day and picked up the apprentices and journeymen from the Sept city. So she had dragged around the street, her eyes on the ground, hearing the laughter from the dock. Everyone else was going home, hungry for supper and eager for the day ahead. Everyone but her.

She lingered until it was time for the last vaporetto to go. Only a few journeymen shared it with her, all of them properly dressed and masked to enter the city from the Sept island. On the island it was safer. Everyone was Sept or choir or made glass. On the mainland there was only suspicion of those who made the island trip daily. Cecilie wished she could hide behind the decency of a mask, certain that the misery and shame showed plainly. Julietta had always said that she couldn't keep a secret and couldn't tell a lie, that her face was as easy to read as the morning news.

At least when she got home Mamma was already very busy in the kitchen and Papa was on just with her older sister Mena, who had married and moved out just last year. She was able to yell hello and slip into the bathroom and wash before anyone saw her. Maybe she could scrub some of the guilt and indecision away before she had to face anyone with talk about her day.

She sat in front of her plate, full of colorful peppers and pasta, her mouth unable to work. Papa was telling about Mena's phone call, but Cecilie could barely make sense of the sounds. Only one thing occupied her mind, and that thing churned around and would leave her no peace.

"And so, Cecilie, how was your day?" her mother asked, as she did every night just after the meat was served.

Cecilie's mind was blank. She shrugged. "It was a day. I'll be testing for senior apprentice soon."

Her mother sighed. "Then you'll need all new clothes. I don't suppose you've saved anything out of your allowance for that."

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Cecilie blinked. "B at I have, Mama. You know I have a positive account. I haven't spent much since I started earning."

"Yes," her father said. "Cecilie has been very responsible with her money. I'm proud of you, that you didn't go and waste it all on going out and restaurants and hairdressers and fake nails like too many young girls. That Valentina, for example. She must be pushing negative numbers, with that new Vespa and the nails every week."

Cecilie didn't comment. She didn't do her nails like Valentina because her father disapproved so deeply, and because she thought it looked silly on Valentina while they still had to wear the uniform; she didn't have a Vespa because Valentina shared, and often picked her up when they were going out for coffee or to one of the Brother-Septs. It seemed so simple and obvious and so ridiculous for conversation.

Any conversation seemed inane. She tried to unstuck her tongue in her mouth and say something. Her parents could help her, would tell her not to do something so vile as to crack her own Sept's security code. They would get angry, her father would be very righteous and her mother would tell her that there was no reason she should ever return to Sept-Fortune again. She could get a perfectly good job in her uncle's shop, selling glass to the tourists. She spoke five languages. That was worth something.

Language was essential to Sept training. What good was information if you couldn't understand it? And her mother had pushed her to this apprenticeship so young simply for the languages involved. "No matter what you do in your life, even if you never do Sept work, you will have those languages. You could become a tour guide on Mirano, or teach languages, or work in Uncle's shop. You can do almost anything if you have languages."

Now the idea of being a tour guide or working in a shop made her want to gag. She was too highly skilled, too valuable, worth too much. She didn't want to live home until she married like Mena had, with all the rules and curfews and Mamma and Papa interrogating her friends when they came to call.

Somehow she managed to nod and make the right noises while her mother gave her advice on her new wardrobe, where she ought to shop, what colors she ought to consider, what magazines she should study, and how she ought to divide her budget for skirts and shoes and earrings. Her father chimed in at the mention of money, insisting that it was better to buy a few good pieces than a lot that was cheap. Yesterday this topic would have delighted her. Now, as Mamma compared the various boutiques and planned a strategy, Cecilie could barely listen. She didn't know if she would survive to go out next Wednesday. It only made her more nervous.

Finally her father ended it. "The girl will want to go with her friends," he stated. "And she needs to learn to do these things by herself. She's going to be on her own soon, a journeyman at the Sept and maybe get her own apartment with those girls."

At this her mother began to cry and her father apologized and Cecilie was able to slip out and into her own room. She closed the door and tried to find some calm. Her room had always soothed her. It was spare and small, stuffed animals on the bed and a shelf of porcelain-faced dolls that had once belonged to a great-great-grandmother she only concessions to frivolity. The apartment was high enough that she had a good view of the sky, now streaked with the liquid colors of the oncoming night. She had always loved this time of day, this place. The quiet was like that at the Sept-House or a convent, the silence of thought or the careful structure of Bach sung

by one of the great choirs. Something deep where she could curl between the layers and be lost.

No comfort existed in the little room. No quiet could soothe the chattering in her head. *Do it. Don't do it. It is wrong. You have no choice. You will live with having done wrong all your life, you will know that everything you do and think and work at is dirty. You will have no life at all if you do not do it. You will have to become a shopgirl and sell things to tourists and pretend that you are ordinary. And besides, maybe you won't get caught. Maybe you can do this and deliver the goods and never have to do anything terrible again.*

*It isn't even so bad, really. It isn't like I'm collecting data that could hurt our clients. It isn't like I'm going to sell it to their enemies. I'm just part of the security testing system, is all. Even if I get caught all I have to do is explain that Sept-Fortune is making sure that all the key changes are current.*

Thoughts chased each other around like kids on the soccer field until they exhausted her and she fell into a restless, fitful sleep.

The next morning Cecilie woke in her clothes. The blanket was under her and her uniform was hopeless. She smelled bad and her shoulders hurt.

At least there was something easy she could do. She stripped off the skirt and blouse, hose and underclothes into the cleaning pile and wrapped up in her big red bathrobe and went down the hall for a shower.

The water made her feel better, or at least smell better. There was a new leaden ball in the middle of her stomach. She did not think at all, she could not think. There were only the heavy movements of getting dressed in a clean blouse and skirt. At least she had hung up her blazer when she had come in.

Everything was going too slow, was too much effort. Idly, Cecilie wondered if she had the flu. It felt like flu, like watching herself move through water and too tired to care. All she wanted was sweet oblivion. And no one seemed to notice.

Breakfast was laid out the way it always was, coffee and frothed milk in the old ceramic pitcher her mother had brought back from a trip to Greece. Rolls in a basket, flowers in bright morning colors between the coffee and the bread. She drank a little coffee and picked at the food.

Her parents seemed oblivious to her distress. Cecilie was certain that terror was written all over her face, was clear in her slowness. She wanted to tell them about this choice, about the deadness of realizing that she had decided. She wanted to but the words were frozen in her throat. She could scarcely acknowledge them for herself, could not really believe that she was going to go through with this.

There was still time. She would arrive and Signora Tima would tell her it was all a mistake. She would get in and there would be a message waiting for her with a big smiley saying that she'd already passed. The vaporetto could sink, the floods could come again, the Last Judgement could open up the skies before she had to break every code of decency she had ever learned.

She finished her coffee and left the roll untouched on her plate. Her father kissed her on the forehead and wished her a good day.

"And a good day to you, Papa, Mamma," she said in something that resembled her normal voice as she went through the door.

The vaporetto did not sink. The Last Judgement did not come. When she arrived at the Sept-house she was sent directly to Signora Tima's office yet again. The roses on the desk had opened and one

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was dropping petals. A few peach petals curled on the polished rosewood as if they had been scattered by a designer for the effect.

Looking at them meant that Cecile did not have to look at Signora's face. Or herself. Concentrating on the colors and textures in front of her made them all so much more real, and the conversation and her own decision so much a part of the shadow.

"I am very pleased," Signora was saying as Cecile studied the still-life in front of her. "Many girls don't understand that this promotion is the most difficult of all. Once you have been accepted as a senior apprentice you are truly a member of the Sept, not simply a student. And of course it is necessary to insure every member's loyalty. This was all understand, all have been tested the same."

Were you tested? Cecile wondered. She couldn't really imagine Signora breaking even the most casual directive, let alone a stone-deep rule. And yet it seemed that Signora was saying just that.

"You will report as usual and go through your normal procedures," Signora said. "Then you will attempt to bring the information I have requested. You will not discuss this assignment, you may say it has the utmost security and you will not explain what you are doing. And when you succeed, you are to return here and hand over the proof on paper."

"Can't I just add the data to your queue?" Cecile asked, really surprised at this request. She had never written anything official on paper, though she and Julietta and Valentina had often practiced secure communications together. And once she had received a paper letter from one of the Sept-San Marco boys. Niccolo, the one with the darkest eyes she had ever seen.

"You know nothing is truly secure in a mail queue," Signora said. "No, this is sensitive data and must be reported by eyes. No copying out, you should know that." The old woman sighed and shook her head at Cecile as if she were the very youngest and stupidest apprentice.

Cecile's hopes constricted in her throat. If the data was too sensitive to put in the mail, it was not simply proof that she had been and gone. It was not something innocuous that couldn't hurt the client.

If the Sept had wanted to run through security, they could have even planted their own markers for apprentices to take. That would have been very easy and straightforward, and would prove the same thing.

She could still run. The doors to the house weren't locked on the inside. She could bolt, go down to the quay and leave the island, report to the authorities.

Who couldn't care or already knew. Or were too afraid of the Septs to do anything against them. So she would be considered crazy or a liar and sent either to Santa Clara to join Lucia or end up charged with defamation and barred from the island forever. And she would have to work in her Uncle's shop or worse. They might even make her leave Venice, and the thought of that was more horrifying than any other.

"If you fail, if you're prosecuted and convicted, you will be permanently barred from all Sept interfaces and any other credentialled datatic," the Signora said. "You will lose all user privileges, and will be permanently barred from anything except kiosk exchanges. So I suggest that you will need to do the best job you can. Even apprentices who were as well or better prepared than you have failed. But we have to test some time."

Cecile hadn't even considered that last night. There was more at stake than she had previously imagined. There was no back door, no

clever solution. To be barred from the nets was to die. Without interface in the datastream she was crippled, blind and restrained. She could not survive cut off, condemned to Real Life alone.

What happened to those who had failed, she wondered. She suddenly thought of Lucia, locked deep in Santa Clara with the nuns and the drugs and the doctors. The thought was sickening, terrifying. But so was the act that the Sept required.

She could not bolt and run.

So she went through the motions, left the office and went to her usual station, knowing that there was no reprieve. That there was nothing good anymore, and nothing at all she could trust. So now she was not only going to betray her morals, her ideals, her whole structure of the universe. She was about to betray herself.

And, Cecile suddenly realized, it no longer even mattered. After the announcement yesterday the damage had been done and could not be undone. Yesterday she had still believed in truth and hard work and honoring her parents and the Septs. Yesterday the world had made sense. Now she knew the truth, and the truth was a cage with no escape.

### CHAPTER TWO

Of the city's seven choirs, the Pietà was the greatest, maybe the greatest in all the world. Lina surely had thought so when she had auditioned, when she had begged and cried for her parents to give her not only permission but the fare to go. After two years at the Pietà she was more certain than ever that she had made the right choice.

She had music all the time, perfect and shining glorious around her. She lived and breathed music, surrounded by it the way she was by the city's shimmering golden light. And she could live this way forever, and still send funds home to her family besides. Quiet money, peace money, she thought of it. They couldn't object to her music so long as she was productive and safe.

And the Pietà above all was safe. They had their own marked masks, pale sky blue like the robes they wore. No one would touch a person in Pietà blue with the twisted gold and pearl medallion prominently displayed like the ancient chains of power officials and generals wore around their necks. The medallions were tradition, as were the cut and color of the robes. Both dated from a time when people were known to claim that in the dark they had mistaken the blue for some other shade and killed a singer. The city fathers had been in uproar and the medallion had been created so that there would be no such error again. To kill an enemy was commonplace in an earlier incarnation of the city, but to kill a singer in one of the great choirs was abomination and treason both.

The singers themselves were sacred, inviolate. They made the music and so they could deny it, and in the past they had. Once the Pietà had been silent for a full week, when the Sept-House feud had broken into the streets and the city was an armed camp. Recordings and broadcasts had only covered the silence. They had not pierced the heart of it.

Lina fervently believed that work and love and thought and war could not exist without the music that inspired them. She had learned that this was the essential secret of the Pietà, of all the choirs, from the Maestro himself. It was the base of their power. Though she had found it odd that the Maestro had seen fit to explain something that seemed so indisputable that even a seven-year-old had no trouble

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mistaking it. At least, she had been quite aware of this fact when she had been seven and studying for her audition.

She had also learned that the right kinds of music could directly influence the function of the brain, though she didn't understand all the chemistry that had been presented in the lecture. For her to understand that music itself could create thought and emotion, lay the patterns down for the activity to follow, was perfectly obvious without any of the deathly dull and incomprehensible neurophysiology and chemistry that went with it.

So she had managed to ignore that part of the lecture by imagining the piece she had to rehearse for her violin examination. Violin was much more difficult than piano or voice or even flute, and Lena considered the time far better spent. After all, she had no ambitions to become a Maestra herself. That would entail far too much chemistry for her to endure.

Still she did understand the economics of the situation. Everyone knew that music had some kind of direct influence on brain function, and so the Sept and Merchant houses contracted with the choirs, the smaller chamber groups, and the student instrumentalists to provide the correct atmosphere. Recordings had only limited value, and it required a Maestro to choose just which pieces would produce the desired effect. True, a few very simple selections had been recorded for the shops, to encourage patrons to stay a little longer and feel relaxed and ready to part with their cash. But even the places that patronized the recording market found that over time, people became bored.

The Maestros knew as much about the brain as they knew about music, from stimulating neurotransmitters to matching eye cycles with various modes of thought. That, Lina knew, was power. No singer could deny it. The music had such dominion over her that she never doubted it affected everyone else. She knew it—but unlike some of the older and more politically ambitious singers, she had no desire to lay hands on that power. She wanted only to hear, to experience, to create that glistening ephemeral beauty.

Maestros did not always have to consider the aesthetics of the composition, only the effect. Lina thought that was ridiculous. If music could improve mental function, could induce emotional states, then it could also edify and purify those who listened. It could be a force for beauty and moral good as well as productivity.

This was something Lina desired, but she told no one. The other Pietà singers would laugh at her, and those who studied to become Maestros would smile and shake their heads and say that she just didn't know enough, hadn't learned all the neurophysiology that was required and wasn't even interested in learning the rudiments necessary to understand.

She was a singer, a musician, nothing more—a tool that created the states that patrons requested and Maestros orchestrated. And yet when she sang, when she became part of the music, she didn't need all the years of study, the chemistry and genetics to understand the power in her voice.

Lina felt music wash through her like baptism, like prayer. Maestro had just brought his baton down and Lina closed her book. She didn't want the music to end, never wanted it to end.

"Are you coming?" Sean asked.

Lina was startled. She hadn't realized that everyone else had picked up their music and their bags and was trying to jam to the door, all at the same time. The immediate area around her seat was empty. She had been dreaming again.

"To dinner?" she replied vaguely. She hadn't planned on eating at home. She had expected to eat later, at the reception where their chamber group was giving a short performance. Houses that hired singers always fed them generously after the show on top of their very high fee.

Sean snorted. "No," he said, rolling his eyes in frustration. "To the Luna Cafe. For the show tomorrow. We have to buy tickets or they'll all be gone."

Lina's head spun. Now she remembered. Sean and Eliza had told her the day before yesterday and the day before that. The Luna Cafe was an underground club, the kind she often heard rumors of and wasn't entirely sure existed. People like Sean and Eliza liked to shock, and Lina was certain that most of what they said was what Sean had taught her to call blarney. She liked the word.

But more than just Sean and Eliza had talked about this concert. The rumor was everywhere because the show was forbidden. They were going to play jazz.

Jazz was not completely outlawed in Venice, but it was not entirely legal either. Enough research had shown that it counteracted the good of the city, according to what the Maestro had said. He hadn't said what particular good, though when she was older Lina understood that the beat she had heard was distinctly sexual and defiant all at once.

It took her a little longer to understand the real threat that jazz posed. Jazz defied authority, it stood on the outside with an attitude the Septs and city dignitaries could not abide. And so they had made it unwelcome.

Clubs were not permitted to advertise such concerts and had to pay triple and quadruple their licensing fees. They were not permitted to serve anything but wine and beer and coffee, which was not where the profit was. And so it became very risky and very expensive to put on a jazz concert. Most club owners and promoters weren't willing to take the risk for such a very small profit.

Lina had heard jazz only once in a historical seminar when she had been too young to respond to the anger and pleasure and the anguish in it. It had been placed in with various types of African and Caribbean forms so they could note the influences and interactions. She hadn't really liked the piece, but the forbidden nature of the show enticed her. And maybe there was more to it than what she'd heard in class. Certainly Handel was radically different from Tchaikovsky.

Much as she loved the music she sang, much as she wanted to drown in Mozart and Purcell and Palestrina, she felt weighted down by it as well. There had to be other kind of music, other kinds of ideas.

Maestro had played military marches for them when he had taught the power they had. He had played postmodern, he had played atonal. Some of it Lina liked and some she didn't. She had never heard any of it again.

The singers were paid by the Sept-Houses to keep the intelligence level high. They were paid by the Merchant Houses to keep people buying. And they were paid by the city to keep the peace. None of that was helped by the harsh chords with difficult rhythms that she had heard only in class.

Still, Lina knew there had to be other music. She had heard about other forms, minority interests, things that made people angry or aggressive or selfish. Those kinds of music were not easy to find, and that was a good thing, the Maestro had said.

They were not forbidden. No music should be forbidden. But jazz was not well liked and so there was little money for it. Musicians



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could not earn a living and so they turned to playing proper music or found other contracts doing other things. Besides, from the way Maestro sneered, it was obvious that he didn't consider those people real musicians at all. Some of them couldn't even read music, he had said.

Lina had been horrified. She couldn't imagine not being able to read music. Though of course in the very early days of the Pietà, when it was still a workstation for the indigent, people had learned pieces by ear alone. Maestro always reminded them of that when he thought they were taking too much time to learn a part.

"A hundred years ago, Pietà singers could learn their parts in one afternoon listening to an old recording," he thundered at them. Lina and Ella and Marco and Sean could all mouth the words together, they had heard them so many times, always the same thing. They had wondered if it were really true, that in the poorhouse days singers had actually managed to master the complicated harmonies of Bach or Handel by listening for a single afternoon. Older singers had smirked and told them it was impossible—just Maestro being frustrated, that was all.

"So are you coming?" Sean asked again.

Lina realized she hadn't replied to his question. It was a good question, but suddenly she didn't know the answer. She wanted to hear the new music but it frightened her. The idea of it frightened her. If they were caught Maestro would probably put them on probation, and she could even lose her rank in the highest chamber group and be dropped a couple of notches.

It was one thing for ordinary people to go hear jazz. That might be bad and people would be suspicious, but it wouldn't ruin them. But for a Pietà singer to be caught listening to suspect music, that would throw questions on the integrity of the choir itself.

No one could be permitted to question the Pietà. Not ever. The thought that she could bring shame on her training and her profession was more terrible than even the threat of losing rank.

"Look, if you're going to come you'd better make up your mind," Sean snapped. "I don't want to stand here all night because you can't decide."

Lina felt her face redden and she looked down at her shoes. The pointed toes were scuffed, she should have them polished. She didn't know what to answer. She was afraid.

She wanted to say yes. She wanted to go because everyone was going, and Eliza and Sean would call her a coward if she didn't. And they were the best singers in the choir, the best who hadn't made soloist quite yet. But they would, Lina thought. And she wanted to be with them. She admired them, she wanted to be part of the group.

"I want to go," she said very quietly.

The late light filtered in through the ancient rippled glass that looked out over the bridge. She could see dust motes dancing, spinning like confetti falling during Carnival. The world was utterly, perfectly still.

"Not good enough," Sean insisted. "You either say yes or no. You never make up your mind about anything, Lina, and if you're not going to come, just say so, so I can leave and go have dinner. I have to have the money tonight for the tickets, I can't wait. Either give me money now, or forget it."

Lina closed her eyes and felt the world about to change. The risk of being caught and losing her rank terrified her, but there was some chance she wouldn't be discovered. The sure knowledge that people she admired would sneer at her was more immediate and more painful. "Yes, I'll come," she said.

Besides, if Sean and Eliza went and they were all caught together, she thought that Sean would manage to talk Maestro into being less harsh. Sean had a talent that way.

Sean raised his eyes to the ceiling again. "We're meeting tomorrow night at Cafe Luna at eleven," he said. "If you don't show, especially if there's trouble afterwards—" He left the rest unsaid.

"Cafe Luna, eleven," she repeated. But Sean had already turned to leave.

Cecilie started in the library as she had been taught. There were separate tables for the different Septs, and private rooms as well, with doors that resembled oak with the name of the Sept lettered in gold leaf. A mere apprentice like Cecilie had never been allowed into the Sept-Fortune room, though she had often wondered what secrets lay behind that door. Probably a million masks and disguises, she'd thought, so that no one could recognize the Sept sisters about their work.

Being a mere apprentice and not truly a full member of the Sept yet, Cecilie had only a cheap mass-produced mask inside. Probably ten million kiosk users wore the same one: a plain white shiny face with a single red tear and a large red and white clown suit and turban that made her appear genderless. Of the generic masks, the white with red was the most popular, though white with blue and black with red were fairly common as well. All white had been very popular two years ago, but it had gone out of style again.

"You'll always retain a catalog of generic masks," Signora Lucia had told her class years ago, when Cecilie had first been permitted trial access. "They are very useful in keeping your identity in the background. You are really quite unnoticeable in generic off-the-shelf software, even if you could write better code yourself. Most of the time you won't want the attention."

She had been disappointed that day, having dreamed of the exotic masks and costumes in the picture files—blazing, glittery, in colors as subtle as the dance of sunrise on the water. She and Valentina and Julietta had sketched and redrawn the fantasies they would chose when they were permitted grown-up masks. But the idea that they would always wear the common Domino or Bauta with the traditional tricorn, use the cheapest imaging where the movement flickered and the colors often turned slightly too garish, horrified the girls.

Eventually Cecilie saw the wisdom of it. When you were tracking down deadbeats or following security leaks, it was better to be unnoticeable. And it was especially important not to be recognized as Sept—some of the time, at least. So now Cecilie saw this costume as a working uniform, no more interesting than her apprentice blazer, and far less likely to be put aside.

At least the mask and yards of fabric were only software here. She didn't have to put up with the heat and discomfort this costume would entail in the meat world. Whatever she perceived as physical sensation was very limited, and mainly pleasant. Sometimes there was the hint of a breeze, sometimes a touch of lilac or oriental lily in the sensorium, though often those senses were ignored. Generally she experienced only sight and hearing inside the interface. Most designers weren't good enough to include the subtle senses; most clients didn't want to pay what it would cost anyway.

The library had been created by all the Septs, all the best of their designers working together for generations to create the finest and most intricately sensual environment. So the tables all gleamed with fruitwood inlay and the light danced across the silk moiré wall paper

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that changed color from grey to celadon to almost olive depending on the time of day and some random program to indicate seasonality and weather. The faint scent of carnations was layered with old leather and brittle paper to create a perfume more complex than most sold on the market, and the textures of every surface did not simply reproduce the originals, but captured the essence of them.

Cecilie had long since become used to the library, though after spending time here all the other constructs seemed cheap and not quite finished. She sat in one of the oversized leather chairs at the Sept-Fortune table and summoned her familiar, a bird of paradise that sat on her wrist and whispered locations in her ear.

Zizi, she called it. Zizi had been the first real piece of software she had written, and she had significantly refined him at least three times since into a personalized search engine that could be given key words or names or even fairly intricate parameters and go look for data. It could search independent of her presence and save and file whatever she had requested for whenever she needed it. Zizi only appeared to her in the library, not because she couldn't summon him anywhere but because only Sept members had familiars. Cecilie had been taught that only Sept members had the programming skills to write one, and non-Sept users had various Search Stations on the public levels.

Kiosk users were used to seeing birds and dogs, unicorns, griffins, and myriad black cats wandering around on their own. But they never saw the animals interact with anything else and so ignored them. The tourists saw just more wallpaper, more extravagance for the endless entertainment of the net. When they bothered seeing the familiars at all.

And that was all they were supposed to see. Signora Lucia taught that few non-Sept users even realized there was any way to navigate besides the Search Stations. If someone did, some wild talent managed to program some crude facsimile of a familiar that might ever discover the Sept-only levels, that program would be killed immediately. The griffins and basilisks and a few of the panthers were not familiars themselves, but had originally been created as anti-virus guardians. Their duties had been expanded to include all unauthorized programs only thirty years ago. In that time they had found very few offenders.

Cecilie told Zizi that she wanted the public records for the Bank of North America filed in the past year. Zizi could not get through any security pass, but was tireless in tracking down information that was available to the public, if the public knew where to look. The bird flew obediently through the multilined window set with colored bottle glass—well, the illusions weren't always perfect.

Then Cecilie dropped out of the interface and reestablished awareness of her own work cubby, cut the feed lines, and went to real life. There was no use doing all the legwork before she had thought through the problem and the protocols, gotten some idea of the type of security she had to breach, and come up with a strategy for overriding the fail-safes.

All security in the nets was breakable. Nothing was every perfectly protected, utterly inviolable. That had been lesson number one when she had begun training in Sept-Fortune's specialty in security. There were one or two methods that were nearly so, but they depended on physical possession of verification keys that changed constantly. Those were expensive and clients hated using them, so the clients wound up not using any security at all. That had been lesson number two: something a client will use is better than a superior design that the client will avoid.

There were also the very large prime number keys which theoretically could not be broken at all. Still, Cecilie knew that even Sept-Fortune security systems had enough cracks and flaws in the finished product that there were ways into even the prime number locks. Prime number locks were terribly expensive as well, and very few clients wanted to pay out so much for something that was not all that much more secure.

After all, who besides a Sept-Fortune sister could possibly break any kind of professionally designed security system? The days of child hackers and wild talents getting into government systems was long gone. Most of those incidents had happened because the systems themselves had not been adequately protected in the first place. Those stories were the reason clients were willing to pay Sept-Fortune's price to make sure their secrets were protected.

Sept-Cargo worked for less, but security was only a sideline of their data delivery services. They did a nice job for small business and individual files, and their rates were affordable to ordinary kiosk-users who felt a need for some additional protection. Large commercial entities that needed data seriously guarded were happy to pay what Sept-Fortune charged.

No, there were very few security systems that were truly secure against a Sept sister. Against some kiosk user, or the run-of-the-mill government clerk, a Sept-Fortune system was golden. Even a mid-level user from a commercial organization or a freelance datadog wouldn't be able to enter.

But Cecilie was not as harmless as any of these. That was why the Septs were so closed, so guarded, so respected and feared. They were sometimes called the netninja, a name Julieta had written in red paint on the concrete under the bridge near her home. They had to be ultimately trustworthy, incorruptible, beyond reproach.

And they weren't.

Then Cecilie saw it all together like a puzzle picture clear for the first time. What no one else could know, and it thrilled her. Guilt came with the taste of power but couldn't erase the sweetness of the vision. Because it was power the Septs had, power beyond any commercial group or government.

No one owned the Septs, and no one could come close to them. Various companies and governments had tried to field their own netninjas, but individual talent could not make up for the generations of tradition and training the Septs had to offer.

Besides the Septs were descended from the working groups who had created the infrastructure of the nets, and consequently had knowledge that none of the competition had. In the end, the companies and governments failed. Their best netwalkers became Sept, with journeyman-level offers and promised House-room at whatever location they preferred. Every major Sept had Houses in Tokyo, New York, San Francisco, Rio, London, Venice, Hong Kong, Amsterdam—the list went on and on and on.

Cecilie never wanted to live long-term at one of the Sept-Houses in a distant city, but she had often dreamed of being sent to do a special job to some exotic place, Santa Fe or Singapore or Bahrain. Sept-Fortune had been aptly named. It was not only one of the first tier groups that had pioneered electronic privacy, but it was one of the richest as well.

And the Sept had never hesitated to spend money on itself. The house in Venice had once been a palazzo owned by a merchant prince. It was tiled in marble and the walls that were not covered in silk or carved wood had been painted with murals on classical and natural themes. The courtyard garden had once been part of an

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adjoining property that the Sept had purchased and incorporated when the Venice House had become one of the two training centers. Generations of apprentice girls had perched on the edge of the fountain to do their lessons, careful not to trample the flower beds where Signora Tima cut roses and lilies to put on her desk every morning. A new top floor had been added to the main wing house with a gym with a swimming pool under a glass canopy that could be closed in winter.

This was where all the apprentice parties were held, when the older girls wanted to invite the brothers from Sept-San Marco or Sept-Lynx. Except for meals and parties, the apprentices and students were relegated to the newer building that had been incorporated later, where there were no gilding or murals or crystal chandeliers from Murano. Cecilie had been in the Main House ballroom only once, when Flavia got married. The wedding took place in the cathedral and then they took a full regatta decorated with white and gold streamers to the Sept House, where a Pietà chamber choir provided the music. Cecilie had thought Flavia's wedding was like a fairy tale, and expected her own reception to take place in the same ballroom with the same music and the same piles of sugared pastries piled on silver trays in the corners of the room. All the food, all the music, the whole reception had been provided by the Sept, and the House chefs had worked for weeks on the menu.

There were two chefs employed in the Sept-House kitchen, as well as several sous-chefs. Dinners were served in the main dining room and always counted a full five courses. The island was too far for anyone to go home at midday, and so everyone from Signora Tima to the youngest girls in their first-year-apprentice jumpers ate under crystal chandeliers and drank from centuries-old Murano glass with blue and green dolphin stems.

Sometimes the Sept would purchase blocks of tickets to a play or opera. Every summer there were trips to La Scala and in the winter they went skiing in the Alps, in a lodge owned by the Sept and with interface capabilities in case someone had to catch up on work.

And upon attaining journeyman rank, Sept-sisters were entitled to a month of vacation every year in one of the pleasure lodges—and if she were married or had children the entire family was of course included. Cecilie had often seen vacationing families when she and Julietta went skiing, older Sept-sisters from all over the world taking their families on holiday.

Cecilie reminded herself of these things, of her parents' wonder and her sister's jealousy when she was accepted as an apprentice. There had never been any question: she would do what she had to in order to stay. Her parents and Mena had never been to La Scala, had never been skiing, had never really had a holiday.

She told herself this but she still felt uneasy, out of sorts. She wanted to run, run away forever so that she wouldn't have to face herself.

A chime sounded a clear C. Cecilie sighed. Zizi had returned. She slipped back into the interface. There was a moment of nausea and then she was sitting at the Sept-Fortune table in the library, where a small bird with curling feathers that shaded from cobalt to aqua paced on the table. As soon as Zizi saw her he fluttered to her shoulder and preened her mask. Zizi didn't like her masks. He preferred to play with the long strands of her hair. But now she was too old to go into the nets face-naked. It would be rude of her to show unmasked the knowledge she had about anyone. And so Zizi worked his small beak on the mask that was not a mask.

"Data," she demanded.

The bird-familiar whistled, then began to speak in the voice she had resampled five times in the past twenty months. Now the whisper was high and squeaky and almost innocent, suiting the familiar's shiny round eyes and eternally smiling beak.

"Data on request one unavailable. Security record in Sept Fortune, designers Alice Sung and Lydia McElroy out of San Francisco House, installation completed August, final payment..."

Cecilie shook her head. She didn't want to know what the Sept had been paid. Signora Tima had made it more difficult, putting her against designers from a distant House. She had studied with the best in Venice, and attended when several Sept sisters on vacation or on temp assignment had taught seminars. But not these two; and so she wouldn't know their style.

Maybe not so. She smiled. "Access Sung and McElroy's study records," she instructed the familiar, and then left the interface again.

Some people would just go in and try to muscle it out. Valentina would do that, Cecilie thought. Valentina solved problems by being nastier than they were and waiting them out. If a program did not yield to one form of persuasion it would yield to another.

Muscle was not elegant. Cecilie prided herself on her refinement. Her programs were spare and efficient, her tracers direct and focused. Valentina sometimes got there quicker, but never beautifully.

Perhaps Signora thought she had found something Cecilie couldn't crack, a security system designed by two sisters who had never seen Venice and whose style Cecilie wouldn't know, straight off. There was Sept style, of course. Cecilie could immediately recognize which Sept was responsible for any piece of netware by the signatures and flourishes, the combinations of paradigms and the underlying structure, though within any Sept's style there was infinite room for creativity.

The chime came back faster this time. She returned to the interface and this time Zizi did not try any preening.

"They studied together in San Francisco House, never left," Zizi said, and Cecilie's hopes fell. "But one of their main instructors was Marguerite Michaelazzi." And Cecilie wanted to whoop. Now she knew exactly how to approach the problem, where to begin. Unless they had completely revolutionized the entire practice of security design as they had been taught it, if they had been Michaelazzi's protégés they ought to have left a few things Cecilie would recognize.

Marguerite Michaelazzi was one of the greatest designers and teachers of her day, and she had trained Signora Tima and Signora Lucia and Signora Amelia, who had taught Cecilie.

So it wouldn't be so far a stretch, she thought. It should be like trying to follow Signora Tima's markers where she had been assigned that last summer. If they followed Michaelazzi's philosophy, as Signora Tima did, then their code certainly was not unbreakable. And there would be familiar patterns, even if only in the underlying structure. *Barrier, password, cipher, verification, identification* the library went, in ascending order of reliability. She had memorized that her first months in the Sept. And the best way to create any security system was to use a mix of all of them, in ascending order so that a would-be break-in would get tripped at some interior stage and tagged and traced.

Suddenly she was excited, and the guilt and worry that had been pushing her for the past day disappeared. The challenge consumed her. Feeling as if she could do this thing, she wanted to try, to see if her skills were up to matching the best. Cecilie knew she was good, but she didn't know how good. She had never known. Too much had come too easily. The thought of knowing, of trying, of outwitting

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two of Michaelazzi's students in one afternoon, thrilled her as nothing had since she had met Donato at the San Marco party last month.

Learning to create security systems had given her all the skills necessary to break into one, she realized suddenly. For a moment she felt dizzy. She could do anything with this ability, go anywhere, take anything she desired. No one could stop her.

The knowledge that she had such power—or might have it if she were really as good as she thought—exhilarated her. If she could do this alone, then together Sept-Portune could rule the net. Which was the same thing as ruling the world. She felt as if she could see into something larger, as if a pattern were coming together and she was just at the edge of a deeper and more profound understanding. Then it was gone.

She scratched Zizi absently and sent him off to his perch in her home queue. Then she left the library.

Out the front door and down into the pedwalk, she was alone and so marked as Sept for at least the first few meters until she hit the Mall. The Library had been carefully constructed near the Mall so that Sept sisters and brothers could disappear into crowds easily. The Mall was always crowded. Cecilie had always hated it.

It was ugly. There was no reason for anything to be ugly in the net. Everything was mutable and had been carefully designed, could be redesigned. But the Mall, for all its incarnations (brass and ferns, marble and fountains, neon and brushed aluminum, oatmeal carpeting and amber lights—there had been others but these were the general cycle Cecilie expected) was always hideously crass. Tasteless, she thought, even though today (in the brass and fern motif) it pretended to be genteel and respectable. The shop locations never changed even though the decor cycled. And the shops were boring: all the clothing knock-down discounts, all the housewares of second quality—or so they were portrayed in the Mall. Once they showed up in real life they could even be worse.

Cecilie cringed from the thought, from the cheap sweaters and towels and garish cosmetics displayed on tables near the doors. There was hardly any security here. In a virtual Mall there was no way to steal. The punch-up or texture wasn't nearly high enough to make any of the merchandise all that appealing anyway.

Not to a Sept sister, at least, who lived Real Life surrounded by silk and flowers, water and music. The Mall was miserable, but it served its purpose. She was one of dozens of customers in the same mask. She made two full circuits, stopping in at the places she found palatable—the florist, the hosiery shop, the candy store (where she almost ordered a box of four truffles) and the stationer's.

On her second time around, as she examined the paper uploads, appreciating the good software that conveyed texture and weight, she bought a sheaf of dyed Japanese rice paper. And when she had finished the transaction she realized that she had created an alibi without meaning to. By making a purchase she had put a marker on her own presence here with a timestamp. That was considered very good evidence in court.

Signora Tina should be pleased with that additional detail. The Signora always said that it was the details that mattered most. Now Cecilie understood that the caution had been meant two ways.

She left the Mall through the Commercial Gate. There were seven gates to the Mall, which was the center of what had been planned as the Main General Interface but was generally just called Mall Level. If there should have been a garden, Cecilie often thought, or a beautiful cathedral, but the level had been designed by a Houston team. On the

Sept Prime level the Library extended into the central zone, but that was the place beyond the restricted doors where she didn't have the keys to go.

The Commercial Gate markings were grey on every level, even those that no one but the Septs knew were there. At the Commercial Gate menu Cecilie chose the Banking icon. The doors slid open before her and she got into the plain cubicle. Doors shut around her. When they opened again she was in the Banking sector.

There weren't many people in the Banking sector. Mostly data packets were shot between icons of various establishments with a few random kiosks outside for the convenience of the few elderly who preferred to bank in person rather than through a kiosk.

"You can bank at any convenient kiosk in your hometown," the announcement said in welcoming tones. "We can serve you at over ten million locations wherever you work or play."

Cecilie tried not to snicker. For all its programmed friendliness it was primarily designed to get rid of customers, suggesting that their best interest lay elsewhere. She had heard that line before. She got out of the transport and began to wander through the canyon of dull blank facades. They didn't want her to enter.

Some were better jobs than others. Two really old ones looked like they had been designed when banks had their own program staff and were either too cheap or too hidebound to have it redone right. Sept-Domino's recent work was really impressive, Cecilie thought. She could tell which illusions had been written after the Sept split had taken effect and cornered the market. The images they presented gave the impression of great stability and wealth and made her feel like a little girl with sticky fingers at a grown-up dinner party. She wanted to be anywhere else. Which was exactly the point.

Two kiosks guarded the entry to the street. "The kiosks at the corner are fully equipped to see to any banking need that may arise. They are connected to every financial institution in this area," the announcement told her. Cecilie passed and walked down until she found a doorless structure labeled "North American." Definitely Sept-Prado work, and a recent redesign at that. She turned and faced it. Nothing happened.

"I'm looking for information about a loan," she said, and tried to giggle the way Julietta did when she was nervous.

"This is not the correct interface. This is not the correct format. Any banking kiosk in your home city will be happy to assist you." This time the voice was quieter, directed only at her, and emanated from the darkness in front of her.

She tried to giggle again. "But I'm already here, and I paid my access fee. So how come I have to waste my access and go back out and do it again?"

The voice sighed softly. Cecilie was shocked that such a customer-unfriendly response had been included in its repertoire. A window appeared in the dark, a screen and scratchpad under it, and a series of keys on the side. It was not quite a standard interface. Cecilie smiled.

She went through all the loan information she could manage, paging through everything from mortgages to educational enhancement to personal development. She realized that she lost the first taste of information because she had been excited that her ruse had worked. Now she had to keep her mind off that and concentrate on how the data was being accessed and presented to her. It was almost standard, but there were the quirks she had hoped to find.

Every system had its signature. Every institution had its own style. Which words were highlighted and where, and how they jumped

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from one set to the next gave her some insight into the collective mind that had become the bank's programming stamp.

"Style counts," Signora Amelia had said in seminar. They had been discussing different signatures and styles, personal and group variations, all the microscopic technicalities that went into every single choice of color, image, words and font. Each of those bits of trivia meant something from a security standpoint, whether it was analyzing customer needs to creating an interface that would suit the client's corporate culture. Such clues were also useful in assessing client needs.

Now Cecilie understood much more. Even whether the program ended with "quit" or "stop" or "bye" or "exit" told her something. And she could use that knowledge to design or implement or upgrade a security system, as Signora Amelia had taught was the goal in seminar. Or she could use that same information to evaluate the security system in place, who had written it and what the company's needs and goals were. Which would tell her more about how the security was devised—especially if that security system had been written on a Sept-Fortune contract.

Cecilie had gleaned all the information she could from this level. She closed down the window and sauntered back down the street, back to the transport, and this time touched the icon for the Parc.

### CHAPTER THREE

The Parc had the same function as the Mall, only three levels up in hierarchy. There were no crowds here. A few people wandered around the pond admiring how well the swans swam, how they bent their necks back to preen their wings. These people didn't wear benthic masks. They had software from the finest shops in . . . Rio? Yes. Definitely Rio. Rich tourists, then.

Rio, New Orleans, and Venice had the best maskmakers in the world. Freelance software flourished there in small private ateliers by non-Sept programmers. Maskmaking was the final bastion of the freelancer on the net, unregulated by Sept organization and rules. Cecilie had never thought to wonder before why they, of all the functionaries in the net, had not finally created a formal Sept of their own and joined the Board. Perhaps because the designers didn't have to be in the net at all to concoct their creations.

The freelancers built only custom work that cost a fortune and would draw every eye in the net. Styles in these mask-design centers were very distinct and there was no mistaking a Venetian costume (ambiguous and elegant) for something from Rio (very revealing) or New Orleans (historical and thematic). All three cities were major Sept centers with a history of maskmaking, and the glitter-walkers who could afford the most extravagant styles for their one or two forays a year into their private accounts.

With more careful examination, Cecilie realized that the costumes were not truly top-of-the-line designs from a name Rio studio. They were knock-offs, copies of the ideas that looked perfect from a distance but didn't hold up under scrutiny. The motion, while more fluid than the off-the-shelf standard style Cecilie wore, did not have the rich grace of the really expensive masks. The colors were brilliant and it wasn't until she looked more carefully that she realized the hues lacked complexity and depth.

Okay, so maybe they weren't tourists. Maybe they were company hackers on a lunch break, showing off their netknowledge to each other or to some poor management dupe from the upper floors. Cecilie had run into these kind before. The Sept sisters ignored them.

They were good enough to access the three main levels, but their jobs generally revolved around databases and company networks and training new hires on whatever slutware packages their companies routinely used.

They looked over, saw Cecilie, and didn't acknowledge her. Her generic costume on this level meant that she didn't belong—or that she was Sept and no business of theirs. Which was just as well. Cecilie had no desire to be polite to suits, even if Signora Tina did call it "marketing" and tried to encourage all the apprentices to be helpful to potential clients.

Besides, thinking about it all was just putting off the inevitable. Procrastinating and figuring out amusing little tasks she could justify as research didn't get the job done. Even through the interface she could feel her stomach knot and her knees go weak. She wanted to sit down on one of the benches and breathe hard until it passed.

Only it wouldn't pass. It was guilt and distaste and a childish wish that if she waited long enough it would all go away.

It wasn't going away. It was a wall. Even this sojourn on the third level of the net was a diversion. In order to really do anything she would have to go to the deep level and swim in the datastream itself.

She had practiced on the oceanic level maybe once a week since she had been in Signora Amelia's seminar, but she had never been there entirely on her own. That was Sept territory alone. No other users knew it was there, or should know it even existed. There were six Sept territory levels, several of which were for maintenance and the rest of which had been built gradually as the Septs slowly took over the various functions that kept the net running. Every level had its own special uses and designs. Signora Amelia had emphasized the oceanic level as particularly useful for both building and testing security systems.

Slowly she waded into the pond. There were other much more orthodox ways to access the deep level, but she liked the idea of this one. She had never tried it before. Signora Amelia had mentioned it a few times in seminar as an "evasive tactic." At the time she hadn't comprehended exactly what that might mean.

There was no sensation of water as such, but Cecilie could no longer feel her legs. They were immersed in the deep level. She felt like she was melting—no pain, just a strange sensation of disassociation. Then her head sank beneath the water and the deep level transfer was complete.

She was a finite point of location in the consciousness that was the infoscape. Movement was rapid, fluid, everything in neat packets on a definite course. There were tides here that were connected to the currents and eddies that were the direct routes of the datastream itself. Here there were outcroppings and reefs and even the sunken wrecks that marked prenet sites and libraries.

The oceanic metaphor level was one of the deepest constructs in the net, and it was not wholly human-oriented. This was where the millions of machines that comprised the net and the humans that swam in it could interact most directly. Here beneath the surface interfaces, the data structures were more vulnerable, more amenable to intervention. This is where the security shield would be weakest. This was the eternal back door, created by the Septs and maintained by them in secret—a secret easy enough to keep from those others, but important enough to guard zealously. A secret that even if known could not be used without training and practice and knowledge of the paradigms that had formed it.

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The Septs had created this level of the metaphor and the Septs guarded it. All their luxury and power and wealth were enticements to keep this expertise private.

Cecilie moved through the medium that seemed to her to glitter like water. But moving there was nothing like swimming, or like moving through any of the other layers of the net. Paths were mutable and currents often diverted and changed. There were only the markers, the lighthouse posts along the way. Each lighthouse was a site, and each site opened into a vast lagoon that had been shaped by artists and Sept-Prado and by the users themselves left over from the time before.

Signora Amelia had taken the seminar group to the Disney Network lagoon for practice. There the structures were familiar of childhood and yet completely appropriate in the underwater world. Cinderella's Castle looked like it was on the bottom of a giant aquarium, and The Little Mermaid's long red locks floated like scarlet seaweed. Here Sept-Prado had not altered the iconography—there was no need. Everyone understood just what those images represented, and it would have been heresy and an assault on every childhood in the world to transform any of them in even the slightest detail.

Which was not always the case. Most companies had not been designed by the likes of the Disney artists, and experts from Sept-Prado had spent thousands of hours trying to establish a visual base for most of their clients. Cecilie was certain that North American Bank would be one of the stodgier and less appealing lagoon sites.

She knew the lighthouse series to get to the banking archipelago, and she was there almost as quickly as she could think through the steps. The datatide swept her along, then broke on the first barrier reef to the entire mass of islands. Each island contained a lagoon, each belonging to a single bank. The barrier reef was only the lightest security, purposely made so that authorized users could enter easily.

The first reef was far simpler than any of the constructs at Disney. There the security had to be invisible so the site looked as if there was nothing at all hidden. There the reefs were brightly colored and covered with bright fish and seaweed to distract from their function. Sea caverns made in the likeness of classic movie sets hid other project interfaces that were still secret.

Here there was a path through purposefully threatening coral branches and poisonous tentacles drifting innocuously around the jagged spines. There were colored fishes and flashing electrical eels on their watch patterns. But there was a way through. The barrier reefs were made to be traversed by someone who knew how to look for gaps in the defenses, who understood that to travel too fast would attract attention from the eels and to go too slowly would summon the neon watchers.

Cecilie hung back and watched the reef. She watched how the rest of the sea flowed around and through it, how the sea images wove together and parted, where the random timing had been done and where a regular watch schedule had been set. And then she saw it, the smooth rock between oversized outcroppings of coral. It looked vicious but it was large enough to admit the watcher fish and packets from the stream.

Here in this medium she didn't have to image her body. She could be one more packet sent on the tide. She retreated to the nearest lighthouse where she could reconfigure her own exterior read, and then launched into the datastream with the brightly coded red and green and orange packets on their way into the lagoon.

Being passive was hard as she was whisked through the medium and rushed toward the reef. It looked too close, the coral ready to pounce, the rigid spines to tear and grab. The energy pulse shoved her though, diverted her just as she was about to hit a spine and spun her quickly on her side. Disoriented, she was flung down an obstacle course that she couldn't have negotiated on her own. Precut paths and switches diverted her from danger after it already seemed too late.

And then there was silence. The water shimmered pale turquoise-green and everything was full of light. After the turbulent passage through the reef, the lagoon was a paradise of calm.

Cecilie took a moment to finish shaking, like she did after riding the big roller coaster she'd initially hated but felt obliged to try, lest Julietta call her a coward. The reef was scarier than any roller coaster Julietta had ever found, and now in the safety of the aftermath she felt the backwash of terror blossom after any reason for it was past.

She had been deposited in a holding site, a central pool with eedies and links to various structures, all piled over each other and shifting position through the lens of the illusion. Several of the constructs went transparent as light touched them, and she could see through five or so at once, as if they were objects made of glass.

Now she had to find the site she wanted from all the strange icons in the lagoon. Not the stolid bank icons that showed up on the kiosk menus and marked the Commercial Banking segment on the Mall level of the net, these had been changed into sea myths and images that bore no relationship to their names or functions. She had garnered all she needed about the internal workings of the bank programming on the Commercial Level, where the company had a great deal to say in how its image was interpreted.

Here, though, everything was interpreted differently. In fact, Cecilie wondered if the executives and computer departments of the various institutions had any idea of how they appeared here. Most likely not. They properly shouldn't even know this level existed. Even if they did, this was not exactly territory where they were welcome to come, and the back doors by which they could enter this level were carefully safeguarded by Sept security.

She had been only to nonsecured sites on this level before. And while nothing here was safeguarded the way it was in a more public venue, there were still barricades and defenses, the first of them being identification. Whoever had plotted this lagoon had had a vivid imagination.

Looking around, Cecilie could identify the wreck of the Titanic and the Nautilus and three Spanish ships with great red crosses on their sails. When she looked more closely she could pick out Sinbad's boat and a great white whale cavorting with a great white shark. Each one was a banking icon.

No, whoever had designed this had not only a great imagination but a twisted sense of humor. She wondered if the other lagoons were equally strange, if perhaps one had all the characters from Alice in Wonderland and another was full of figures from the Old Testament. It would make as much sense. Which was none. Which is what Sept-Prado needed to do for their own sanity, she supposed, after trying to appease clients with neither imagination nor humor.

But she had to choose something. Vaguely she identified the three Spanish ships. Columbus had sailed to North America. It made as much sense as any other representation on this waterlogged menu. She pointed at the ships as if she were reaching out to touch a board.

The focus froze. Everything went two-dee and then there was a flash of blank green before she found herself facing North American Bank yet again. The representation had changed to dry land, and this

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was now an impossibly high skyscraper that belonged in a financial district. It dwarfed her and made her feel like finding what she wanted was going to be impossible. Defeated.

And then Cecilie realized that was the whole point of the image. It was no more a true representation of real life than her own chalk-white skin and the glittering ruby tear embedded in her cheek. In fact, as she looked more carefully, she realized that it was the same building she had seen in the Commercial Sector earlier.

If there was a way in it would be a back door. Utterly obvious. So obvious that it could even be subtle. Cecilie abandoned the steel facade with its black-out locks and ID ports. Instead she walked around the structure which seemed to go on forever. She turned two corners with no sight of a breach in defenses. She turned two more and still found no sign of the back door that had to exist. Though there was no guarantee that she was near the back yet anyway. She was starting to tire and become frustrated. She went around a fifth ninety-degree angle, and one that was more like sixty degrees, and the seventh corner was more like an S curve. And then she saw it tucked into the curl of the S, and was thankful that at this level no one bothered to write in smell. Because she would have gagged.

There was a dark gap in the faceless building. Dumpsters full of garbage guarded the shadow of a door. They had not been emptied in a very long time. Cecilie noticed that they were overfull and that whoever had created them had bothered with fine detail like tossed cups and candy wrappers in among the piles of shredded paper and coffee grounds.

Cecilie slipped between the dumpsters. Even though she knew there was no support for high-level kinesthetics here, she was sure she could smell the stench and her stomach protested.

She tried the door. It was locked. She smiled. It would have been ridiculous otherwise. Just because Sept security always left a back door didn't mean that they had to make it too easy to get in through it.

She examined the mechanism and could see nothing. Probably passworded. The designers had been of her own Sept. The back door was not only for their personal convenience, but for the Sept as well, in case some other sister was called in a decade after the designers had died. There were a few passwords that were common to the Sept. Now all Cecilie had to do was figure which one the San Francisco team had used.

Not Orff, that was too musical a reference and she didn't think that any other city had quite the musical advantages of Venice. And Nevada was older and too obvious for North America. Then she licked her lips and said, "Men's eyes." It was the password she would have used.

The door didn't budge. Cecilie could have sworn that she had chosen the correct password. There were others, certainly, but she reigned in her frustration and thought about it logically. The designers had been from the Sept's San Francisco Headquarters House. The bank was also North American. Cecilie thought about it a moment longer, and then carefully translated the phrase into lightly accented English.

The door opened a crack. Cecilie slipped inside and closed it behind her, hearing it lock shut. She was in. But she was still identifiable as a foreign body in the workings.

She stepped down the one dark corridor with her back to the wall. Her hand brushed something soft and she recoiled. There was no one inside, and she touched the soft thing again.

Sung and McEvoy *did* leave themselves an opening. Cecilie pulled on the janitorial overalls over her Carnivale costume. Now she was camouflaged as a mere utility function against the automatic telltales and tracers. She wished she could get Zizi inside to do her data search. Zizi would be faster than she, and less noticeable.

Still, it had been almost too easy, she thought. So she knew how Signora Amelia always left access and how Signora Tima told them never ever create a system that a Sept sister couldn't penetrate—in case she were hired on to do additional work, of course. Always keep things in the family. No doubt there were harder ways to go.

At an intersection in the corridor was an in-house information kiosk. Cecilie pulled up a datamap that managed to miss all the interesting sites, but at least it told her where not to look. Figuring out what was missing and what ought to be there might be difficult for some half-trained Company hacker, but for her it was easier than the final exam in the subject two years ago. Signora Tima had taught them what kinds of references should be deleted or layered or hidden embedded elsewhere for internal security. Now that lesson worked well in reverse.

Cecilie tried to control the queasy surprise she felt at her own knowledge. She had been trained to write these systems, and so she had all the skills necessary to break one. Whenever she hadn't been certain what to do she could merely look back: on the years of classes and seminars and practicums she had attended. Now she wondered vaguely whether they had really been training her to design security systems or to break into them.

She had three good bets as to where to go. The map showed her where the transport banks were, transports just like the Mall level only with much more boring icons. She sighed and pressed one that didn't appear on her map. The system didn't question her.

Typical. There was much less security from the inside. The transport opened, not onto a typical library, or even a terminal access area, but into something like an old fashioned bank, with a high marble counter and human-seeming tellers behind ornate brass grillwork. The tellers were retrieval fanliars, like Zizi but less sophisticated and autonomous. Though Cecilie never had heard of a bank that promoted autonomy.

There was no line. She asked for everything Signora Tima had requested, names of principals and their percentage of voting stock, recent acquisitions and mergers and loans to affiliated companies.

"I'm sorry, I must request your codeword clearance for that data," the teller informed her politely.

Cecilie smiled tightly. Now or never. There were a couple of good guesses left from the stockpile Zizi had brought: names of children, names of pets, names of grandparents of the CEO or board members were all good bets and Zizi had given her that much. Family names were public record; pet names were registered with the appropriate licensing agencies. She was glad she had built in a subroutine that consistently gathered that data on any inquiry request, whether or not she specified.

So start with the CEO and work down. The first name on his close family list was Alister, the border collie. Without hesitation Cecilie gave the teller the name.

The teller blinked twice, processing much too slowly for Cecilie's liking. And then she was handed a transaction script that would immediately transfer the full complement of data to her personal account. She took the script as if she were bored and walked slowly to the transit box. Just in case she was being observed she punched

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the mop icon and reappeared right outside the broom closet where she had entered.

Thinking about it, Cecille nearly laughed. The designers of this system, her own Sept sisters, had been both very obvious and very clever. There was no reason at all for a virtual establishment to have a maintenance service, or a broom closet, or dumpsters or overalls. People who lived in the meat world would never question it—they were much too accustomed to custodial personnel to even see them. Even those who were more conversant with the norms of virtual space wouldn't question the image. They would simply assume that these were appropriate metaphors for the boring but necessary housekeeping subroutines and dismiss it out of hand.

Even Cecille hadn't found the incongruity striking until she actually touched the mop icon that was found in every building in physical reality. And then she had only realized that the mop and the idea of a broom closet and the overalls she had pulled off and replaced where they had hung were not the usual guise for routine machine functions. Silently as she slipped out through the back door, Cecille admired the elegance of the breach.

Maybe that was why she had been sent here in the first place. Signora Tima knew there was an easy way into this system, at least for someone who was careful in her work. That set Cecille a bit on edge. Maybe the whole thing was a set piece and she hadn't violated any confidentiality and she wasn't guilty of sin and criminally liable to boot. If she had worried herself sick about a fax run she would be very angry.

In fact, she was angry. Angry at Signora Tima for misleading her and angry at herself for not realizing that no one would ever really ask her to violate Sept codes on that level.

She was so angry that she didn't think too carefully as she left the lagoon. From this position the reef was easy to traverse. It was only getting in that was hard.

The anger overcame everything else, even the relief at having made it through something that was much simpler than it ought to be. She hit the first lighthouse marker without even a quick scan to see if it was occupied. She passed by the chipped red reception desk with full schematics and transfer data spread all over it, and headed directly to the Sept lounge. No one was ever in the marker point lounges—Cecille had often wondered who had decided that they must have hard backless benches and scuffed linoleum floors. Someone had gotten carried away with the word "lighthouse."

She heard someone chuckle and she started.

"Very nice. Now if you'll just hand that script over to me..." the stranger said.

She turned briskly. There, standing as far from the splintering benches as possible, was someone in a full Venetian mask. It was a custom job, very expensive and beautifully tasteful. The face was a Renaissance sun and the golden flares twisted and twined in the marker environment. The body of the costume was sky blue shot with gold, shapeless as all good costumes were to hide the body underneath. But even well concealed, Cecille was certain this was a man. He was not only tall but broad in the shoulders, which Cecille found amusing. He could have chosen to hide more carefully. Or to deceive her.

Signora Tima! Or one of the other Mistresses of the Sept who would know where to find her and what she had been after.

She shook her head slowly. "I know who you are," she said, the fury just banked in her tone. "I'll give you what you wanted when I get back, only I'm going to want some answers. Like why did you

lie to me and why did you have to make me believe that I was doing something—evil?" She hissed the word.

The figure in front of her did not respond immediately. When he did speak he seemed just the slightest bit confused. "I didn't know you knew what I was after or that you would give it to me," he said. "We've never even met properly. And if you did know what I wanted, I wouldn't believe that you would give me anything anyway."

She was off guard and angry, certain that this was not one of the Signorae from the Sept-House. From her Sept-House, anyway. Or from her Sept at all, from any of the other Fortune houses that dotted the globe. There was something not quite Sept-Fortune in the choice of words, in the precise design of the mask. She did not feel the familiarity that long years of similar training and experience bred in all the members of Sept Fortune, no matter what their generation or city of residence.

"Tell me who you are," she demanded, sure that now the game was over it would be a member of some other Sept who had just made senior apprentice. This was an initiation joke, perhaps, but she was already tired of it.

"You don't know who I am," the sun said. "And it wouldn't matter anyway. I just want that script you have in your sleeve—and then you can forget you ever saw me."

"This isn't funny," she snapped. "It wasn't funny to begin with and now it's gotten really boring. So why don't you just get back to your own Sept-House and leave me the hell alone, okay?"

Sept-San Marco, she was willing to bet money on it. This person had the same kind brand of arrogance. Signora Tima often mentioned Sept-San Marco, and not pleasantly.

Even with the impassive mask, the sun managed to look confused. "I'm not from a Sept. I'm not from any Sept. Give me the script or I'll publish the tracer I've got on you, with ID. Even Sept ID. Give me what I want and I'm gone like I was never there."

"Oh? For how long? Until you decide to use the tracer on me again?" Cecille asked.

"No, that's the deal. You get your records, I get the bank's records, and we're even," the sun explained.

Then Cecille began to worry.

"You're not from Sept-San Marco?" she asked as a scenario came full-blown to mind. This bank with its easy back door had been set up to be used as a test by all the Septs. One of her Sept brothers had followed along on his test and was gathering his data. From her.

It made sense. At least it made a lot more sense than anything else. That was just the kind of thing she'd have expected from Sept-San Marco anyway.

The sun laughed at that question, too. "No, Cecille, I am not from any of your precious Septs," he said, slurring his words. "And you don't have any idea who I am. So why don't we just complete this transaction before I turn over my trace records to the authorities and let them deal with you and the Sept both."

"Go ahead," she sneered. "You haven't got a real trace anyway. Anyone who really was Sept would know that I didn't break into a real database so the data is useless and so is your damned trace. So you can just crawl under whatever rock you crawled out from."

The sun began to laugh with surprise and good humor. That startled Cecille more than the demands and the derision. Even more than her outburst, which had frightened her. As she had said the words she had been perfectly aware that his traces would be perfectly good and intent has nothing to do with breaking security codes. And



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if the data were only fake, that was the thief's problem, not the court's.

But she had been given too many ultimatums lately, had been forced to do too many things that she hated. And she wasn't going to give it all up because some jerk in fancy dress threatened her. Maybe it wasn't smart, but she wasn't always smart. Sometimes she was just plain mad. This time she was angry at everyone, at her parents and Signora Tima and the Sept and everything she had done for the past day.

Only her parents and Signora Tima and the Sept was not there and the figure in the sun mask was. Cecilie felt not the least bit of remorse over her outburst, and was even angrier over the laughter.

Finally the sun stopped laughing. "Damn, you're good," he said. "I mean, I knew you were good, but you're totally off the scale. I didn't expect to be that impressed."

Which didn't make any sense at all. Not that Cecilie cared. "I'm not here to impress you, Mr. Smartypants. I'm not sticking around to listen to your patronizing, snooty drivel, either. I have a job to finish and you can just sit on your hands or you can get out of the way. And be real glad we're not in the meat world, because if we were I'd turn your face into mashed potato."

Her hand darted out and plucked the grey trace-card from the sun's taunting fingers. Then she began transfer procedure to the next marker.

The sun blocked her path. "No you don't," he said. "That was pretty impressive but I'm not going to let you get away with it."

"You can't let me or not let me do anything," Cecilie hissed at him. She began to weave the connections on the pale green routing map tacked to a dingy wall that had maybe been pale pink. A corner of the map was torn and it was faded across one side. Cecilie didn't even acknowledge these fine details as her fingers touched a series of dark triangles and red lines that looked just like the highway map of the Venato her father kept tucked in the Bible.

The sun pushed between Cecilie and the wall. He was large, bulky enough that he could hold her arms at her sides and prevent her from finishing. That didn't matter, Cecilie thought with satisfaction. She'd created most of the transfer before he even realized what she was doing.

He grabbed her arm as she tried to fade into the protocols that had appeared as a freight elevator opening in the wall. She struggled but he surrounded her. The doors chimed and tried to close as Cecilie bit his arm. Then she felt embarrassed. That was a fairly minor tactic here even if it had been effective on that drunk Sept-San Marco apprentice a few months ago.

"Then promise to meet me," he said as he pulled her slowly from toward him. "Tomorrow night at the Luna Cafe. For music. Music that'll completely change your life." And he snatched the data packets from her as she bolted back to the elevator.

Now the elevator was gone. Only pale pink walls with layers of grime remained smooth in the place escape had been. She was too late and he brandished the data he had taken from her, gloating.

Cecilie couldn't believe that he had actually done that. Twice. Well, if he wasn't Sept there were a few tricks he wouldn't know. She had seen that kind of attitude before and knew that he was trying to take control of the situation.

In his dreams, Cecilie thought. While he was busy with his little victory dance he had given her time to summon her familiar. Zizi appeared through the wall in a flurry of blue feathers. She pointed to the grey trace file and the bank data tucked under the sun's arm.

The familiar was smaller than many, but it still was large enough to be threatening, and its beak was sharp. The bird of paradise did a lazy turn and then dove like a peregrine directly at the sun.

The masked thief dropped down instinctively as Zizi swooped down from the ceiling and lost hold of the files for a fraction of a second. That was all the time the familiar needed to pluck the papers delicately from the floor and made off with them.

Cecilie smiled slowly, nastily. "Checkmate," she said. "'S over."

The sun shook his head. "It's only starting," he said. "You might as well decide to work with me now. The two of us together could run the universe. Who else knows that there's someone else in here, someone running around in your precious secret levels? Or that there may be more wild cards than just me. You. Me. That's it. The Septs don't know."

Well, he hoped the Septs didn't know. He couldn't believe that any organization was sensitive enough, flexible enough to pursue the matter even if Cecilie had reported it.

Cecilie silently cursed that this was not a physical medium. She would have loved to bash his face in, put her fingers though that elegant mask and obliterate it and the sparkling, satisfied eyes behind it. How the hell had he known?

And then another figure appeared. This one wore a human face as a mask, an ancient human face that had been weathered colorless and wrinkled so that all expression was present at once. Cecilie wondered why anyone would choose such a mask with so much else available.

"So that's where you went," the old man said.

The sun darkened visibly and Cecilie realized that the old man was talking to it, not her.

"I was careful," the sun replied. "No one could trace me."

"I traced you," the old man said acerbically. "You should know better. This was very stupid, David. You are not usually stupid, so I will give you another chance. But you have been very very lucky and what will you do when your luck is all gone? What will you do when someday one of your little games doesn't work?"

"What about her?" the sun asked, illuminating Cecilie.

The old man sighed. "I suppose we should bring her along," he said after some hesitation. "We can use decent Sept work. But it was still very dangerous, David. What if she reports us? What if she doesn't believe you? Then what?"

Cecilie listened, amazed. She thought she understood and closed her metaphorical eyes. She would have liked to take off her mask, to see this David without his. Because now she understood that she had been set up.

Maybe the whole thing was a set-up and Signora Tima was involved and the whole Sept as well. Only that was too crazy. This was too crazy. Her head spun. At least the data was safe with Zizi.

She should run. No matter what they wanted it had to be bad for her. Otherwise they could have just issued an invitation, not played all the games.

And yet while Cecilie was frightened and angry, she was too curious to leave. She wanted to know what they wanted. The whole procedure felt faintly like the games that had brought her to the Sept.

"I suppose we should invite her for some sherry," the old man said. "Perhaps you ought to do that and explain it all to both of us. Because I did not authorize you to find anyone else."

The sun sparkled even more radiantly than before. "But this is one we can use, Artos. She's Sept. Sept-Fortune, in fact."

The old man, Artos, seemed to huff indignantly. And then he disappeared.

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"Don't worry about him," the sun told her. "He'll really be very pleased when we're in the meat world. But we have to be careful. This place is secure but Artos don't believe that anything or anyone is ever secure. So . . . I will contact you. When we should meet. You will come, won't you? To hear the music. Then you'll understand."

Cecilie shook her head. "I'm confused. You don't have anything now and I'm out of here. Why do you think I'd show up just because you asked?"

The sun smiled, an intoxicating smile that she could credit only to the finest maskmakers. "Because you're curious. You won't be able to help it, you'll have to know. It'll make you crazy. But tomorrow night at eleven you'll find me."

"Oh, and how am I going to find you?" she asked. "You're going to be all blazing like you are here? Or are you just going to be this much of a jerk?"

She didn't wait for an answer this time. He didn't try to hold her as she called up the elevator that appeared in the blank wall, but she shouldered him aside hard anyway. To make up for the tension, for the indignities. For all the miseries of the past twenty-four hours.

She was going home now, to the Sept, no longer innocent. She would give Signora Tima the maybe-false data and she would destroy the trace Zizi had stolen. And then she would go out and buy clothes and become a senior apprentice.

All her dreams and goals were about to be realized, but Cecilie felt only tired, and dirty, and disillusioned with the whole world.

### CHAPTER FOUR

David Gavrillic stretched and opened his eyes. It was late afternoon, and the ceiling shimmered with the reflection of the water in the canal below. The old lady's squint, the Venetians called it. The only place in the world where they had a special word for that particular ripple on the ceiling. David usually thought it charming, but today he didn't notice.

The old man had nearly ruined everything. How Artos could just blunder in like that and pretend to take charge . . . Gavrillic sighed and pressed his palm to his eyes. The old man still thought he was in charge, that he had the great plan and that David was simply his best and brightest tool.

And David knew: it was his own fault. He had let the old man believe it, had played impressed with the palazzo and the interface and all the amenities the old man had provided. Though of course they couldn't compare to home. Not that the old man knew that.

And even if he did know, even if he knew David's family name and the balance in his Swiss account and the full inventory of houses, vineyards, islands, art works, even then the old man would think that he had given David something very special indeed. Because the old man had brought him to Venice, and to a Venetian there was nothing of greater value. Even the meanest apartment in Venice was worth more in their eyes than the largest and most perfectly appointed town house in Rome. Venetians were snobs.

Sometimes, like right now, he wondered why he bothered playing to the old man. He didn't really need the help, not even the introductions and the bitterness Artos carried. He could do it on his own, and better, too.

He had the Pietà singer who couldn't get enough of his body and paid dearly in music and information. Though what information came out of the Pietà often tended to be fragmentary and useful only when fitted with other data from varied sources. Still, he would have

preferred the singer's bed to his own. At least the old man hadn't traced him there. Yet.

But the old man had that nearly forbidden music, and in the end it was the music that kept bringing David back. It was the music that opened his mind and gave him the greater vision, the soaring moments when he realized what could happen if only the Sept system were broken. If anyone could be free to access without all the layers of the kiosks and the mall separating them from real interface there would be a revolution. The Septs would die, their stranglehold on the infocsa swept away in the datadice.

And there would only be freedom and movement and improvisation like a sweet sexy riff that turned and invented itself again and again, tossed between instruments until it had grown tears and smiles in all the wrong places.

Or so David thought in his optimistic moments. This was not one of them. He could have managed things with the Sept-sister and the old man almost made it fall apart. Even now he had little idea if she would actually show up, if he could get her to listen to the jazz, corrupt her soul so that she would lead him through the levels he couldn't quite comprehend.

He wasn't sure she truly understood them, either. The Septs behaved as if they were the ultimate repository of all knowledge about the net. Their skills and training were legendary. But David Gavrillic would not, could not admit that they might have some edge on him.

Only because he couldn't become one of them. He had been recruited when he was seven, his parents contacted. And he had known what the contact had meant and had lain awake anxious for nights hoping desperately that maybe this time they would see reason.

There was no basis for this hope and his parents reaffirmed all his surities. "You, an apprentice?" his mother said, her cultured voice sneering at the word. "As if we couldn't buy and sell them fifteen times over." She had sighed. "I suppose they do offer advantages to the middle class, but why should David have to go to a lesser school and spend all his time learning access that he can hire someone to get?"

"And who else would take over the business?" his father had asked.

His father had never had to say any more. For over a hundred years the Gavrillics had headed one of the greatest trade consortiums in the world. David knew from before he could talk that he was already apprentice to his father's position, and his grandmother's before.

It wasn't fair. He had an older sister. But there was something wrong with Serena, something that all the money and the best clinics in the world didn't understand and couldn't change. And so when she was eight and David had been only five she had been sent off to a residential school for other children like her. David remembered only that she didn't speak and sat in the rocker for hours and hours and would sometimes shriek and knock her head against the wall.

He had to make up for her as well as for himself. There were things in life that interested him that had to be put aside. He was expected to be excellent but not to do anything about it. Never to go on. While he had had the raw talent as a skier, he had not been permitted to pursue the serious training that he needed to become an Olympic racer. He had always loved music and his parents had thought it appropriate for him to study piano in until his passion he had auditioned at one of the world's greatest conservatories and had

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won a place. Then he had been placed under lock and key for months to prevent him from taking it.

He had wanted the Sept training more than he had wanted both music and skiing together. They had exiled him from his real life, from everything he wanted and loved. He was the heir of the Gavrilis and that was the end of it.

When he was eighteen and no longer a minor, David Gavrilis had disappeared. There had been a major police effort and his parents had appeared crying on the news, begging the kidnappers to release their son. They would pay happily. Anything.

They never received a ransom demand and the trail was cold. But David still needed the old man for a place to live where he didn't have to pay rent or create a new ID if nothing else. He had money that couldn't be traced, access that was clean. Better than he should have done as a runaway, he thought angrily.

Because at eighteen he wasn't really a runaway. He was an adult and had some right to his own life and to his inheritance. Which he couldn't touch without revealing where he was. Or at least that he was. And he couldn't let his parents know yet, or else he would be dragged back and locked into the country house the way his sister was locked in at her elegant hospital.

The Gavrilis were great merchants, but the Soldanis, his mother's family, were either great artists or crazy. His father blamed his mother for his sister's condition. One thing David had always feared was being put away like Serena, being crazy.

His mother was not crazy at all. She had been a poor girl with a beautiful voice, a singer in one of the great Venetian choirs. One of her brothers had been crazy, she admitted, and taken away when she was twelve. But there were others, two uncles and an aunt, and there had probably been cousins that he had never met.

It was at least a reason people understood for why he had come to Venice. He knew that it was a stupid choice in some ways. Staying hidden here would be harder. His family would look more carefully in a place where they knew he could run to grandparents and cousins. And he pretended that was the reason he had chosen this place over New York or Paris or Vienna.

He could also say that in Venice he could go masked and there would be no questions. Which was true. Most people in Venice masked most of the time. Scholars said that people masked more since the Sept days than in the worst periods of the Carnivale, where nuns would go in their Bautos to meet lovers and gamblers would wear long-nosed plague masks so that their creditors couldn't find them. So David Gavrilis could wear he masks he had bought, the wonderful golden sun and the filigree exotic and the white-rose corpse, and never be recognized even by those paid to watch for him.

He told himself that he had come to Venice to escape. Sometimes he almost believed that here he could find family and peace and simply be a real person.

In his heart he knew that was a lie. He had come to Venice for the Septs. If he was only close enough he could get what he craved. He knew this.

David Gavrilis had never gotten what he truly wanted in his entire life. He had been given what everyone else thought he should want, or what they wanted. That was why they could not find him. Why would the heir to the Gavrilis fortune spend his time wandering the narrow lanes of the Sept-City in Venice where the overly ornate crumbling grey walls made canyons of the street?

The Septs had their own island in the lagoon. It was not theirs exclusively, but they were the predominant force and there was

something in the air that reminded him of the currents in the infosca. The economics that made Venice the center of the Septs were well known to him. He had been trained far more thoroughly in economics than he had ever desired.

There was an old law on the books that the huge old palaces could not be broken into apartments that people could afford to buy. No one could afford the palazzi, and those who owned them could not afford to keep them up. People had moved out to the surrounding countryside, where much of the technoindustry of Europe was located. Venice was nearly abandoned, adrift, far too expensive to be viable but still dreamed of her glorious past.

The Septs could afford the great palaces easily. They could afford to keep them up, and they needed the space. The city had always been a merchant concern, with little respect for anything but beauty and success. The Septs were very successful and so Venice welcomed them home.

The Septs had been good for Venice, too. They had brought in thousands of people who had lots of money to spend and who could afford services that were rarely used anymore. There was money to be made; artisans and specialists and merchants returned and prospered. The choirs and the traditions of masking, which had died in the harsh light of Reason, were revived.

David Gavrilis had known all those things, but he still had not been prepared for Serenissima when he first arrived. He had wandered through this area in the mask of the corpse with white roses. The costume and mask were covered with a great veil that floated around him and isolated him from any contact with the city.

Near the Sept houses he was a dead thing, and the costume, while being without gender as all good costumes were, still seemed to Gavrilis quite feminine. The features of the mask were delicate and there were the silk roses that covered his hair and were sewn all over the shroud. The flowers all were colors shaded with death, pale cream with yellowed edges, bluish pink and some that whispered peach tinged with grey.

He had bought the costume because it was different than anything he had ever seen, and it was sad. Maybe it wasn't a mask at all, he had thought, but his true face while he wandered exiled from the Sept life he knew he should have. Behind his white mask he watched the apprentices come and go from the island in their uniforms. He could tell the different colors and plaids, the grey and blue of Sept-Fortune and the red and black of Sept-Lyon and, above all, he watched the navy blue and green of Sept-San Marco. The boys in their little blazers and ties all trooping together with their schoolbags, chattering like pigeons, made him want to cry. He should have been there, one of them. Not in the cold of the outside.

He had stood like that for many days, had wandered the streets until the old man had found him watching the steps down to the lagoon water as the last motoscafo's wake left a silver trail to shore. The sunset had turned the water blood red and the stone steps burning amber. In the distance he could hear the voices of the Pietà singing something clear and tenderly heartbreaking. Palestrina, he thought, remembering the pleasure of his piano lessons as the music had taken shape under his fingers. It had been a long time since he had played.

"Have you ever heard jazz?" the old man had asked him. It was an innocuous question, Gavrilis thought. And the old man certainly seemed harmless enough, a perfunctory eye mask not hiding his age. The old man tossed crumbs from a crumpled bag he held out on to the stone steps. Pigeons fought over the stale bread.

## Interface Masque—Part I

"No," David admitted. "It wasn't permitted at home. My mother was once a singer."

"Ahhhhh," the old man had said. "A singer with the Pietà? Is that why you wander here, to hear the music she sang for you when you were small? And you are sad because you have not inherited her talent and feel exiled?"

David had nodded, amazed. Not that the old man had it exactly right, but he was closer than anyone had ever come.

The old man sighed. "We're all exiles here. Only those children have a place forever, and then they feel like exiles among the rest of us. But you still love the music."

David did not respond. Saying that he loved music was not reasonable, any more than saying that he loved to breathe or to eat or to walk out into the sparkling November sunlight.

"You love music, but you've never heard jazz," the old man said, and his voice was filled with wonder. "Of course, it isn't entirely legal in this city. It isn't completely forbidden but it isn't exactly approved, either. It lives in that grey area where all of Venice lives. Nothing here is ever clear or simple or exactly what it seems. Everything wears masks."

The old man sighed again. David wondered how to edge away without seeming rude. The old man was just some old pensioner who had nothing better to do with his time than to feed pigeons and talk to strangers. While David—David didn't really have anything better to do either. At least not today.

"But there is a private jazz party tonight near the Lido," the old man said, seeming happier. "Here, let me write down the address for you. Do you have a pocket in that costume of yours? Come around ten tonight, before then it's just the social crowd on their way around the parties before they start gambling. The real music people don't arrive until later. And of course no one would play questionable music before questionable hours." The man chuckled at his feeble joke.

"Who are you?" David asked edgily.

The old man smiled. "You can call me Artos. That's enough for the people at the door. Tell them Artos said you were invited and you'll be fine."

A bell started tolling across the lagoon, a large bell that sounded out death and danger at sea. David watched the last of the color fade from the sky. When he looked next to him the old man was gone.

He took a gondola back to the pensione, a small and ragged place that didn't look too carefully at the forged ID they read into their records. Someplace, with a better monitor or a more current reader would have bounced him and so he had no choice but the places with cells like a monastery and one shared bath down the hall. A place that accepted kiosk cards or cash, no questions asked.

The first night in the pensione had been an adventure, the second night there was still a tinge of excitement. He was living like "real" people, without all the advantages of the Gavrilli accounts and retainers. By the fifth day he hated the stiffness of the sheets, the smell of mold and disinfectant that seeped through the walls, the sound of the toilet flushing in the early hours of the morning and the rhythmic thumping of the bed against the wall every night when the man next door came in from the bars with a new conquest.

In five nights and six days wandering Venice in a white death mask, he had found nothing at all. He was no closer to the Septs and no closer to his mother's family. Maybe it had been a mistake, he considered. Maybe it was worth his father's stern lecture and his

mother's tears to go back home and give up, become the heir the Gavrillis wanted and forget all the sweet dreams of freedom.

He had planned to leave the next day. A week was long enough, especially for David Gavrilli who had never had to wait so long in his life, who didn't think he could live one more night in the Lysol stench with the constant thumping from the room next door. He was all ready to swallow his pride, so what would one evening with some music and a little human companionship matter?

He had had little to do with others since he had arrived. He knew no one and didn't care to know anyone for as long as he'd been in Venice. David was starved for company, for the sounds of casual chatter and a fleeting smile of perfunctory hospitality, and he hadn't realized that that was the problem. He assumed it was his thwarted desires.

Watching the boys in the San Marco uniforms he felt more clearly cut out of them than he ever had surfing the infosea. His fantasies were smashed to shards, all his dreams evaporated like spun sugar in the rain. Only the hard reality of grey stone and silver green water remained, mocking him and reminding him that he had made a choice. And he had chosen wrong.

He wasn't even sure about going to the party for a while. Lonely and miserable, he could only imagine it would be worse surrounded by beautiful people who all had companions and were sought out and desired. David Gavrilli remembered being popular that way and always assumed it was for his money and never for himself. At least this would be one more thing to do, to prove that position. He would go to the party, he would be ignored and rejected, and then he would always know that whenever people showed an interest in him they really were interested in just one thing.

The more he reassured himself that he would be miserable the more he was certain that he had to go. Finally he steeled himself to take his soap and small towel down the hall to the common shower, which was empty at the beginning of dinner hour. He washed in the tepid water to the sound of old pipes humming. The pensione bath was stained enough that he never felt completely clean.

He didn't even towel his hair dry before returning to his room. There was a small sink and mirror affixed to the wall. He shaved and combed his hair, and then put on the sun costume for the first time.

The blazing sun costume was the first he had bought when he had arrived in Venice, but he had never wanted to wear it before. It was beautiful and bright and it drew attention. The sun mask was gilded and adorned with pearls. The costume that covered his entire body was the pale color of the summer sky. Gloves and shoes that matched were part of the costume, and when he was fully dressed not one millimeter of skin or hair showed. The only part of David Gavrilli that anyone could see was his eyes through the holes in the mask.

He took a water taxi to the address the old man had given him, and was deposited on steps leading from the house to the water. It was the first time he had arrived at a proper Venetian front door.

Inside the house was brilliantly lit. He could hear the laughter and catch phrases of song as he saw elegantly masked people glide behind the windows. For a moment he wanted to go back to his pensione and return home in the morning and call this Venetian adventure a failure.

But this was the last night and the first party, and he'd heard about parties in Venice. He'd heard that the whole city was so old that its decadence was no longer merely dissolute, but had acquired forms and structures and traditions of its own. From the darkness in front of the party-bright house he could believe that.

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Then he shook his head. This was just more fantasy. He had found nothing depraved or even deliciously risky since he had arrived. The masks made everything so alien and unreal that he had to think to remember that, stripped of their exotic disguises, Venetians were exactly like everyone else. And this party was probably like every one he had ever gone to in his life, with the same caviar and the same salmon mousse, the same expensive champagne and the same dull gossip as every other party in the world.

It was ten past ten when he went inside and decided over the course of seven seconds that it was like every other party in the world. Then someone small in a pale green and gold costume came over and took his gloved hand. "The Count says I am to take you upstairs," a female voice told him, her Italian accented just slightly in either English or German. David couldn't be sure quite which.

He followed her obediently through the party rooms and up what once had been a grand staircase but was not in good repair. The stone changed color about halfway up and his guide noticed him look at it.

"That was from the last flood," she told him. "They weren't sure if they could even save this house, the silt was so bad. But we managed." She shrugged lightly. "That was when I first came here and met the Count, digging out all the mud."

She laughed lightly. David suddenly had an image, not of the glamorous foreigner who drifted through dreams, but of a serious architecture student in work clothes with her hair pinned up untidily wading in muck boots through sludge. How often the foreign students had come to help the Venetians reclaim their city one more time. The mud angels, they were called, and some day the lagoon and the Adriatic would have their own and reclaim the city that had encroached for so long. Every time it threatened, and every time the Serenissima recovered again, a little more tawdry and frayed around the edges.

The mud angel led him to an upstairs parlor, done in muted blue and rust silks with large tassels on the ornate chairs. Maybe twenty other people were gathered up here and most of them had already unmasked. Many were young, or at least appeared young. When he looked more closely he realized that their appearance was not the result of good surgery. They each sported imperfections that would have been corrected before grade school in any other city. One man with beautiful dark hair had a nose that was too long and several of the women had mouths that were not full and overripe. No one in the room seemed to have the cheek implants that had become fashionable over the past few years, and one man had ears that stuck out and hadn't even grown his hair long enough to hide them.

They didn't talk to each other like the party-goers downstairs, but almost furtively whispered what conversations they had, and rarely remained with anyone long.

The mud angel removed her mask, and David was disappointed. She was not pretty, at least she had done nothing to make herself pretty. Her nose was reddened and her hair was limp and pulled back sharply by barrettes.

But then, with the masks, no one would bother much with their appearance, David thought. Which was a great shame. In Rome and Paris and New York where no one masked, people went to expensive hairdressers and even more expensive surgeons. Everyone was beautiful and everyone worked at it. Here one merely purchased a mask. And when the masks came off they were a collection that mirrored the gates of Hell, all irregular features and less than perfect symmetry in their faces.

He was appalled, and reluctant to remove his sun face at the same time. Without it he was clearly revealed as not Venetian. His nose had been shaped, his teeth straightened as was only considered decent grooming in the rest of the world. He was nothing at all like anyone else in this room.

He was saved having everyone stare at him when the lights dimmed and he could take a place in the last row. There he removed his mask while no one paid any attention. All their eyes were on the small dias on the far side of the room where a drum kit and a bass rested.

Four players came out. One of them was the old man who had invited David, and the old man carried a sax. It took David a moment to identify the instrument. Another was a redhead with a scowl that David found enticing. He had never seen anyone approach music angrily before, and it fascinated him.

Then there was only music, music like David had never heard before. It wandered, it recreated itself, it reminded him of Mozart but the structures twisted like Escher prints. His brain felt like it had been wrapped around a Möbius strip. Heaven and Hell were the same place and they were both in this room.

He had no idea how long the music lasted. He was aware of songs changing, tempos that made him want to dance melting into yearning desire or mourning tears. When the music ended and the others got up from their chairs and left, David Gavrillic could not join them. He was stunned. And he was not the same person who had entered.

He did not realize that Artos had come up to him and begun talking at first. Snatches of melody filled his head and he was reluctant to have to come back and listen to mere words.

"... considered the possibilities of bringing this structure into other parts of the world?"

David blinked. He wasn't sure he understood, or even wanted to understand.

"Jazz is a revolutionary force," the old man said patiently. "Whatever you want to do in your life, if you listen to it you will find yourself more alive, more able to see different possibilities."

David gulped. "Do you use piano in this?" he asked.

Artos laughed. "Of course. Some of the best is done on piano. So, are you really a player, then?"

David nodded. The music had left him defenseless, and suddenly the whole Gavrillic clan had become immaterial. The Septs—well, there was something useful here too. All of a sudden he wondered why he had to be Sept to experience the full range of access he craved. Why he had to have their approval and training to do whatever he wanted. There was no law that limited him, no particular reason he knew that bound him to choose.

Because there was no choice. He wasn't Sept, couldn't become part of their closed system. His privilege had barred him more than his talent had made their skills accessible. The Septs were like ancient alchemists to him, who would guard their secrets to the grave unless an apprentice took all the correct initiations and passed all the tests.

But subtly, with the new music quivering in his brain, he realized that everything had changed. There were no rules any more. He could take the motif he had been and reinvent himself like a riff improvised on a theme. His family and the Septs had not given him choices.

So he could hardly refuse when the old man asked, "Would you like to stay and study?"

# Interface Masque—Part I

## CHAPTER FIVE

“This is beautiful,” Signora Tima said after she inspected the data Cecilie had dumped in her queue. “Better than I could have hoped.”

Cecilie said nothing. Signora wouldn’t be so pleased with a fake. There was nothing she trusted any more. Nothing at all made any sense.

Signora hummed in her throat. “You know, Cecilie, I had hoped that you’d test your promotion before the Board meeting. So that by the time they arrive you’ll be a full voting member of the Sept. We’re on the verge of a new world here. If we can manage to work together we won’t have to put up with all the annoying unlicensed dreamboxes and all the kiosk-riders who need their hands held. It’s the new age of the net that we have been working for ever since the Septs were merely a handful of a million working groups.”

Cecilie gulped. She had heard vague rumors and dreams about a net run only by and for the Septs. Where the outsiders would be kept in their own prescribed places and could be truly denied access to the inner workings. She had always thought it merely fantasy. The net had always been a jumbled anarchy, and while the Septs had made great strides in organizing a coherent whole it was just impossible to keep absolutely everyone confined to the public areas. Or maybe not, she thought. Maybe it really could be done. Certainly it seemed as if Signora Tima believed it, and Signora was usually two steps ahead of the rest of the world.

The Board meeting was just another Board meeting. They happened every two years. The only reason this one was special to Cecilie was that it was scheduled to take place in Venice, and Sept-Forune would be one of the major hosts. All the great designers and net-ninja would be here. She might even get to meet the sisters who had created the security system she had just breached. The idea made her skin crawl.

She looked down at her hands in her lap, not daring to look into Signora Tima’s face. Her breathing was rapid and she felt disoriented. She wanted this interview to end, for the world to turn back to normal. Somehow she could walk out of this room and the past two days would never have happened and nothing would change. Everything would be perfectly reasonable. She hoped.

And she knew that it wasn’t possible.

“You have the afternoon off. In fact, I’ll credit your account and you can go shopping,” the Sept Mother said, smiling. “How does that sound?”

“Thank you,” Cecilie managed, but she could not force the enthusiasm into her voice that she thought the older woman expected. Even the prospect of shopping did not attract her. She would rather go home and hide in her room, turn on some music and try to forget everything. Again.

Instead she got up and left Signora’s office and walked across the loggia. She wandered downstairs to the courtyard and into the back corridors of the house. She could smell the leftover scents of lunch still heavy near the kitchen, but all the noise was gone. Suddenly she realized that she was hungry, that it was late in the afternoon and she hadn’t eaten all day.

Well, it was after lunchtime and no one should be there now. She had a right to take an extra slice of cake, a bit of bread, as she had missed the meal. The kitchen doors were not even latched yet.

Cecilie went in and fixed herself a sandwich, a very thin slice of prosciutto on bread with a slab of red tomato and some basil over it

all. She wrapped the sandwich in a white napkin and wandered out of the back door wearing only a half mask so she could eat.

She walked down the blind back alley to where it met the street and wandered toward the center of town. In the distance she could hear the deep tolling of a church bell and music carried light on the breeze. Not the Pietà, it wasn’t loud enough to be so close by. It had to be one of the others of the Seven Choirs, rehearsing something by Hayden, she thought. Though she only caught snatches of it, so she could have been wrong.

Tourists crowded the streets as she came closer to the main square. Tourism was rampant even at this time of year, and the millions of people with their talking guides in their ears and their uniformly ugly shorts made her avoid the central part of the city. Usually she could manage to stay away from their rude inquiries, usually prefaced by a request for a language she might speak but of which she generally preferred to feign ignorance.

She managed to keep to the shadows and drift by the organized groups, the school seminars where all the students were busily trying to avoid their chaperons and the serious art tours where sour-looking elders stared unhappily at various examples of this or that period of architecture while trying to absorb all the data in the talking guide. Though they did stare at a city native in a half mask as if it were remarkable, as if there were not more people on the street in the full white masks of the city than had their faces exposed.

Cecilie managed to stroll and munch, enjoying the tepid warmth of the day and the excitement around her. She finished with her sandwich, wiped her hands one last time, crumpled the napkin and threw it into a trash barrel already half full of cups from a popular ice-cream shop. This was real life, here in the taste of a snack and the bright red tour guide’s umbrella.

Stealing in past a secure banking system and taking something that she was not even sure was real data receded like a bad dream. Between the polyglot bus groups and the student intellectuals, all with their ice-cream cups and tiny shovel spoons, the past day was simply not believable. There was nothing at all she could touch to bring it back.

She smiled slowly. The worst was over. And she was going shopping. She went down two more short blocks to the maskmakers, thinking that something new for the concert would be nice.

She wasn’t supposed to go to the concert. She wasn’t supposed to listen to any music that was not approved and programmed. But then, she thought she wasn’t supposed to hack through security systems set up by her own Sept, either. She was already on the wrong side of the line. Going a little further didn’t matter.

She went to Vincezo’s, one of the most famous shops in the city. Not the very best or the biggest, but known for quality work and some originality. Besides, the owner’s brother and prime designer was a neighbor and his daughter, Luisa, was Cecilie’s age. They had grown up together and Luisa had taken Cecilie to the shop many times when they were little girls, and taught her an appreciation for fine design and what to look for in a good mask. Even if she wasn’t shopping it would be nice to see Luisa again.

As usual, Luisa was behind the counter paying attention to her screen when Cecilie walked in.

“Hello,” Luisa Maria said before she looked up. “Can I help you with something?”

Cecilie giggled. Luisa Maria had a habit of not paying attention to her surroundings. “Do you speak French?” she asked in that language, in her worst accent.

## Absolute Magnitude

Luisa Maria began to answer when Cecilie pulled off her mask. Then Luisa Maria joined her laughter.

"Are you looking for something or were you just nearby?" Luisa Maria asked. "We have some new software masks that are experimental but quite beautiful. I think you'd like them, if you want me to bring them up."

Cecilie shook her head. "I'm not looking for software," she said. "And I don't know what I want. I mean, this is my first real grown-up mask. Maybe I'll just look and see if something feels right."

Luisa Maria shrieked. "You mean you graduated? Oh, Cecilie, congratulations. Pick out anything you want. Daddy would want you to have it as a graduation gift. That's so exciting."

"Oh, no," Cecilie demurred. "I mean, I have this new account and got a bonus and I wanted to purchase something like a grown-up. You know."

Luisa looked a little disappointed, but smiled anyway. "Sure. Though you know Daddy'll skin me if he knows I let you pay for your graduation mask. But I know what you mean. I just sold my first design into production."

It was Cecilie's turn to squeal and hug her friend over the counter. "But you only finished your first year at the design institute," she said, amazed. "Your family must be very proud."

Luisa nodded shyly. "They are. But you know, it was because of them and some luck that I made the sale. There are better designers in my class. Just that Uncle Carlo had a sales rep in from Milan and I was there with my portfolio. So it just happened." She colored and hung her head. "Anyway, there are some new things here you haven't seen yet. One or two are mine." She blushed even more furiously.

Cecilie stared at the masks on the wall. There were hundreds in every color and composition. There were gilded masks and the traditional whites with black rings around the eyes. There were the jeweled masks, painted in delicate pale tones and decorated with designs in silver and goldwork, set with precious and paste jewels. There were masks made entirely of pearls and others that were famous character masks.

On another wall she saw the familiar sun and moon masks, and hesitated. If he had been the sun then perhaps she should take the moon. That was a traditional and complimentary pairing.

But she didn't want the moon, though there was a pale pretty one in delicate shades of midnight and morning. The one she wanted was on a different wall, all black iridescence with three glittering diamond tears and silver filigree over one eye. The silver ran over into a lace fan at the edge, where it would cover the domino.

Cecilie took it down off the wall as if in a trance. "This one," she said. She hadn't even asked the price.

"And the rest of the costume?" Luisa Maria asked, encouraging. "You could wear this with a plain domino, of course, but we have a high velvet turban and the robe and gloves to match."

Cecilie nodded. She didn't trust herself to speak. She could already see herself in this disguise, silent and powerful behind the shadows. She could even meet the sun-mask for music on his own terms disguised as the Queen of the Night.

Luisa Maria returned, her arms filled with black velvet and diamond glitter dust, purple satin and black suede and links of silver filigree. She sorted the pieces on the counter, a turban with dazzling rhinestone chains dripping over the end into a tassel that fell over a black velvet shoulder. The heavy sleeves of the overrobe were held back by bands of purple satin, jacquard ribbons with silver threads

picking out the rich pattern that matched the underrobe that started at the knees and fell to the floor. Black suede shoes matched the gloves, both patterned with sparkling starbursts. Yet for all the jeweling the costume looked refined, tasteful, almost sober. Perfect for wearing outside of the Carnival time, impressive for those who understood the subtleties of Venetian masque and too plain for those who did not.

"I'll buy it," Cecilie said.

"Don't you want to try it on?" Luisa Maria asked.

Cecilie shook her head. Such costumes were made to be worn by anyone. They were always large and full, hiding her female shape as well as her features. What mattered was that it was beautiful and of a piece.

"Shall I have it sent?" Luisa Maria asked. "Your measurements are still in your profile, we can do the tailoring and have it ready by..." she consulted the readout on her register, "Wednesday."

"No," Cecilie said. "I'll take it now."

"But you'll need at least three inches off the sleeves and the more on the hem," Luisa Maria protested.

Cecilie smiled, face naked. "I'll take it now." She replaced the street mask she had worn as Luisa Maria debited her account and wrapped the costume in tissue and then folded it into a gilt box. The box went into a red lacquer bag with gold tassels on the handles.

"Is it for a party?" Luisa Maria asked. She had heard about the Sept parties. They all had. Stories filtered through the city like water in the canals.

Cecilie saw the faint wonder in the other young woman's face. As if it was so wonderful to be able to go to parties and see some one you wished, not to have to marry or have to sleep with the same lover for more than a night. Cecilie knew what Luisa Maria thought, even if all the stories had been exaggerated and twisted to the point that no one in the Septs could recognize them.

Though it was completely ridiculous. Sept sisters married and had children and quarrels with their husbands. They worried about good nutrition and where the children should go to school and whether they should invite their in-laws for a week at the beach.

They didn't have to marry to live well, that part was true. But the romantic rumors of unbridled license at Sept parties, of their orgies and debauched revels that rivaled much earlier days in Serenissima, were more the products of imagination than any reality. Cecilie had giggled with Julieta and Valentina over the image of Signora Tima at such an affair. Or any of the Signora-teachers of rank.

She had also been trained to never let outsiders know about Sept life. In the beginning it was just fun. As she grew older and dealt more with the world of RL, she realized just how prudent those precautions were. And so now she merely smiled tightly and shook her head. "No parties," she said. "Just street wear."

"Have fun," Luisa Maria said sadly.

The walk home was like flying, like surfing in the system, Cecilie thought. Buying a new mask was such a special thing, taking a new face and persona. She walked through the streets with the bag that proclaimed to all that she had not only bought a mask, but that it was from one of the finest shops in town and was a full costume. She was not a tourist with a souvenir, but a native who had selected new streetware, a new disguise in her hometown.

She peered out the smallest eyes of her plain white mask at the people around her. She wondered whether one of them, face-naked or decently disguised, was the radiant sun she would meet so soon. Thrill ran through her, a sexy small tremor that made her insides as liquid as the infosea. Soon. Soon.

## Interface Masque—Part I

The largest rehearsal hall at the Pietà was prime performance space. The ceiling had been painted in the sixteenth century and the walls were covered in greenish grey silk moire, without the mirrors that were so popular in most of the grand spaces in the city. Mirrors were terrible for the music and so there were none in any of the public spaces at the Pietà. Performers had to make due with the dressing rooms and students were reduced to using the washrooms.

The second choir was standing in their places after rehearsal. It had been a new piece and it hadn't gone well. Lina was tired and wanted to sit down. It wasn't really their fault the new work was so ragged. They had only been given the sheet music two days ago and there had hardly been any time to study it. Though, to be honest, in the few hours she had possibly had free she had been too distracted by the coming jazz concert to concentrate on learning new music.

She was ready for the tiresome tirade that Maestro always let loose when they were less than perfect. All she wanted was for it to be over so that she could sit down. Her legs ached, her back was tired and her shoulders were tense. That was not good for the sound, either, and she knew it, but the rehearsal had had a very unpleasant feel to it all along.

"This piece is important," Maestro ranted in his usual voice. "We are performing it on an historic occasion. It has been especially selected to aid the work that we are facilitating and you should be thrilled that you are going to be involved. The second choir, you aren't even fully graduated yet. And still, we have been employed to keep constant music and the Pietà has never let the Septs down."

"What historic occasion?" Sean asked. Sean was never afraid to interrupt Maestro with a question, a habit that had not endeared him to the upper choirs. So he was still stuck with them when he should have been promoted long since. Which only served to make him more obnoxious.

Lina stifled a yawn. She thought Sean had to be dense not to realize that he was ruining his own chances. With his voice and musical expertise he should have been a soloist in the first choir by now, and not a mere member of the second, but he had never mastered the Italian proprieties. And the more adaptation would help him, the more stubbornly Sean clung to his abrasive ways. Lina agreed with everyone else that Sean had a death wish. Or at least he had no ambition in the Pietà.

Which was odd. If he hated it so much he would have no trouble, with his excellent skills, in finding a much better position in one of the other choirs in town. Lina wished he would go. At very least she wished that he would shut up when she wanted to be dismissed, sit down, and not be subjected to yet another one of Maestro's lectures.

But Maestro did not start yelling immediately, telling Sean that if he valued his music, if he honored his training in the most necessary of the arts, he would learn to behave and not question every decision made by the Maestri of the Pietà Academy. Instead, Maestro put down his baton and motioned them all to sit. Lina was so grateful and surprised that she forgot to curse Sean's lack of manners.

Maestro sighed heavily. "We have a great commission from the Septs. All the Septs. They are having a meeting here in Venice, representatives from all the Houses all over the world. And the reason they chose Venice for this historic meeting was because of the Pietà, because we are here and they need our help. We all know the Septs have fought blood feuds for generations. They have fought in the

streets, made life difficult for us all. And this has been the case in every city in the world where there is more than one Sept House."

Lina blinked. Maestro was being operatic. There had been no fighting in the streets between the Septs so long as she could remember, and she had the impression that whatever differences they had ever had were not solved with fisticuffs. But it did suit the notion of history and the city to think of these as great feuds that would lead to such operas as *Romeo and Julietta*. According to the orthodoxy taught at the Pietà Academy, a little blood shed so that one could have such sublime music was a very good trade.

"But the Septs wish to negotiate a truce," Maestro went on. "They wish to reconcile their differences. This can only have a beneficial effect on all the world. And we of the Pietà are the force that shall make that happen. With the correct music we will be able to keep the peace during this meeting. We will set their minds at ease and foster harmony and even feelings of brotherhood among them. If the Septs are able to come to agreement for the whole world, it will be because our music has brought them the inner peace they need to effect the outer."

"Always we have held and taught that our highest responsibility was to keep the minds of the people sharp and their work focused. We have never attempted to hold a truce between warring factions. It is a new opportunity for the Pietà, a new goal."

"This music is new because it has been chosen with this new purpose in mind. When you rehearse, think of how you are supporting the good of all the world."

### CHAPTER SIX

He had already decided not to talk about any plan before the music had done its work. She was Sept and her whole mindset was ordered by the regularity of Mozart, the calm of Palestrina. This was only the first crack in the armor of a lifetime. This was her first jazz.

So David Gavrilli let the energized asymmetry wash his being clean, rearrange his thought-patterns to something more spontaneous. Maybe something restless like the flutter of the music against the restraints of form. He had felt this recklessness before, that first time he had heard real jazz and fallen from grace in Artos's upstairs salon.

That felt like an aeon ago. He had been a different person in a different life then. He had not known how to really feel alive, not the sparkling alive that mingled danger and freedom and sex. The feeling that was greater than ideology alone, that feeling was his reason for his plan, his vision.

Because after he had heard that first breath of new music, he had experienced a subtle alteration of his perceptions. Paradigms slid and shifted. Nothing was what it had been. Not even his desires.

He no longer wanted to be in any Sept. As he had left that house on the canal, he realized that he was unutterably free. He no longer had any past because he had no ambition. In that instant when the music had changed his soul he realized that all the structures he had lived by were mutable. The Septs, the old music, even the Gavrilli family thought they were ancient and represented some kind of absolute truth about the world, or themselves. That perception had been a lie.

At first David had seethed. He had been betrayed. Nothing he believed had been real and they must have all known it all along. That all the solidity and structure was merely another illusion laid over the honest complexity of reality.



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He had not returned to the pensione that night. The next morning he settled the bill and moved in with the old man and started to learn to play jazz.

In the first year of his study he realized that he had not been willingly lied to by everyone around him before he had come to Venice. No, everyone he had known in that other Gavrilli life had been lying to themselves. They had believed all that claptrap about structure and reality, orderly thought and logical relevance. Maybe they believed it because they needed to believe, maybe because they weren't creative enough to see past whatever they were given. Garbage in, garbage out.

David Gavrilli lost the immediate sense of rage that had motivated him at first. It felt like a loss when he let it go. Without the anger he seemed to have no purpose.

And the music he played had no real purpose. It was not like the music of the choirs that performed approved pieces to increase associative intelligence, it was not to calm and soothe, to make complacent and comfortable and sometimes to pierce through with the sheer beauty of it all. There was more hurting than anger in the music, and more longing than he had left.

Though he understood the longing, understood the scratch dirty pain in the blues. The hole inside him that had been full of rage and desire had gradually become full of a hope. Somehow he was going to break the stranglehold on everyone's mind. He would tear down the Septs to their roots and root access.

The vision was his lover and he belonged to it utterly. He guarded his vision as merchants had once guarded their daughters.

He was not the only one the old man had recruited, had brought to the palazzo. He rarely saw the others. Most masked outside their own rooms, and all whispered down the halls at odd hours, trying to avoid contact. David didn't care. Real life was to be avoided. The only life he wanted was in his vision. Nothing else mattered.

After almost a year the old man pronounced himself pleased with David's music and he gave Gavrilli the one reward that David had never considered. In the year that he had spent all his time with music and imagination, he had missed life in the infosea. But there had been so much to learn.

Now Artos brought David to a dreambox like the one he had used at home. Not quite as inviting, to be sure, but the interface was state-of-the-art even if the amenities were lacking.

David enjoyed that. He found that, after a year away from the dreambox and living for music, he saw everything differently. He entered through the Mall, which was the way he had always gone, the way the kiosk connections were linked, the way everyone always went. Only most people never went beyond the Mall level.

Now he saw the concourse differently. He was in one of the brass-marble-palm tree decor phases but he could perceive the faintest shadows of the other possible realities that were equally part of the program, merely incipient in the now. Suddenly David wondered if all the possibilities were present all the time, and if it depended more on the individual and the interface mechanics which rendition of the place one encountered.

The other people there seemed less substantial than he remembered. At least most of them did. A few gave the impression of weight, of tangible flesh, though of course there was no flesh at all.

At first he thought these were the ones who had been to the better maskmakers. The higher priced software did give off a more realistic appearance as well as finer design. But then he stopped and really studied the costumes and masks of the more concrete participants and

realized that many of the designs were merely second-rate. The software might be better but without elegance and artistic superiority, David was not about to accept that these were merely the products of a better shop. No, an atelier that produced such fine detail in the Mall would take care that there was some reason to bother with the detail. They honored the truth that function was beauty.

The next two times he entered the Mall he noticed the same thing and started to follow the individuals who had impressed him. They all came from or went to a place just outside the Mall. A library.

Then he knew they had to be Sept. There were places they could go that he could not, and he had heard about the Sept center on the Mall level. So much else he had learned had been false that he could not honestly believe he had cracked their mystery until he walked up the impressive steps past the carved griffins and through the front door.

He was not barred. Maybe they thought it wasn't necessary. He found the reading rooms and began to explore, though he watched the solid-looking Sept members at their assigned tables. There were animals and legendary things that came in and out and reported to their owners. Once he saw a cartoon creature, another time he saw something from a famous picture. He watched the interactions and saw what they had brought to read, and saw that he was ignored.

Maybe it was just that everyone was ignored as a matter of course. Or maybe the fact that he could get in here meant that he was free to use what he could, to explore as he might.

Being raised as a Gavrilli meant that David was accustomed to privilege. He was used to doing as he liked, getting what he wanted, and so he didn't hesitate to take as much advantage of the library as he could.

There were things there that he was sure most Sept members didn't access, most of it data about the net itself. And so David learned of the early design specs for the datasea and how to surf the currents and ride the floorboards. He saw how once upon a time the whole was a chaotic hodgepodge where things didn't always fit or work. Reading more about the process of design and when the Septs came along and began taking over routine work and keeping the place tidy, he realized that the difference between the anarchist net and the organized one was much more a function of philosophy than technology.

This knowledge made him sad and angry and a little afraid. He began to read more, to access the vast history stored in this library's memory and storing it in his own. He was shocked to realize that the Sept system was barely a hundred years old. In that time they had risen from specialty working groups in a vast array of programmers to the only people with the training to create and dominate all of virtual life. Which meant all of life as he knew it.

He began to wonder if he were paranoid, seeing an intricate conspiracy where none existed. He could not deny the information he had retrieved, though. From short histories and Sept school texts he had gone into the sets of personal memoirs and to original source code. Everything corroborated his growing distrust of the entire net.

From there he went further, studying the Sept manuals on the whole of the net as they had reconfigured it in the first decade of their power. They had created layers and layers of levels that only they had the knowledge to access. Only now he had that knowledge, too.

He practiced in each of the stages as he discovered it, learning to swim in the oceanic tides of the infosea, discovering how to navigate the subbasement where things sometimes grew on their own. He was discreet in his exploration, always afraid that some Sept brother or

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sister would come upon him and know he didn't belong. He had no idea what they would do to him, and he suspected that they might be willing to kill.

For months on end David didn't see the old man. He spent all his time in the drembox and the library where he didn't see any of the others, wraith creatures who hid behind draperies and whispered at the table. He could believe he was alone in the old old building sinking into the canal as the water crept through the stone supports. He was alone and he was obsessed and he was untouchable. No one ever found him.

But he couldn't do it all alone. That had been the final blow and the most painful. He had not yet paid back the old man in full, though he had every intention of doing so.

Soon, when the Septs were broken. When jazz was free. When he took control.

Once he had thought that to be Gavrilli meant having power. Wealth was power, he was taught, and authority. Trade and deficit and ownership were all power. Compared to what he had now, the power of the Gavrilli was a paltry thing. He looked back with amazement that he had ever considered it significant.

Now he was a god. He could create and destroy in the infocsa, he could ride invisible and omniscient over the tides. He made music that shattered the structures of the mind and he embodied levels of reality beyond anything the Gavrilli could ever imagine.

He called up the image from the Academy in Florence, the white marble with the settled face created by Michelangelo, and then decided that he liked the Donatello David better.

"The Septs have always had power," the old man said one morning when he finally insisted that David join him for breakfast. "But they have always had the competition among them that has let power slip down the cracks like canal water. Now they know that and they are resolved to seal these ways we restore the ancient places. To make them watertight so that no one may enter. So that no notes can bore into their minds and restructure the whole."

After he had acknowledged his own power, the old man had returned with a full retinue of wan young followers. Most of them knew jazz but didn't play. Most, David suspected, didn't have the discipline to practice for hours at a time. Their languid soft hands were too weak for the keyboard, their skin too delicate for the strings, their palms never calloused by a drumstick. And yet the old man expected David to accept him, to accept them.

While David was confused, he decided to play along. He wasn't sure yet if the old man and the wraiths could be useful to him, and the Gavrilli had trained him never to pass up anything that might be useful. Which was how great-grandfather Carlo had taken a reasonable inheritance in Roman real estate and turned it into a frightening fortune that spanned the globe and included foodstuffs and pharmaceuticals along with electronics and transportation and even textiles. Great-grandfather Carlo had never said *no* casually, never turned away an opportunity, never assumed that something was worthless merely because it was flawed. He bought it and turned it into what it should have been all along.

David had been taught these things. He knew that he had more of his great-grandfather in him than his green-hazel eyes and his heavy dark hair. Sometimes he had looked at his father, a pallid manager who wanted only to conserve wealth, and his mother who had been a soloist at the Pietà at the age of twenty-two, but had been too frightened to leave the compound since David had been small. They appalled him. Now he remembered who and what he was and he so

he listened to Artos and played along carefully because the old man could be useful. In just what way David had not yet decided.

They were out to dinner at one of David's favorite places, where he could get pasta with spicy peanut sauce and ginger ice cream. It was one of the few cuisines that tempted David to eat at all. The old man kept saying he was too thin and should eat, eat more, eat healthful food. David was always too busy to bother.

"The Septs have been planning a meeting," the old man continued. "The kiosks are not so free any more. And now the Septs want to take them out of the jurisdiction of the city and put them directly under themselves." The old man sighed heavily. "The one thing that we could always rely on was that the Septs hated each other. They competed against each other, this one in that market, the other in this city. All of them never trusting the others. I remember that when I was young. But now it's all different. And I hear that they are going to meet in some Grand Council and find a way to forge a monopoly. If they don't kill each other then they will succeed, too."

David smiled. "Maybe we should have someone poison the paté," he suggested.

The old man shook his head sadly. "I have considered it. Inelegant, and fairly out of date. Also much too easy to trace."

David was surprised. He had not thought that elegance in the classical manner mattered so much to Artos. But then, of course, he was a Venetian. David, as a Gavrilli, was much more concerned about what would work rather than aesthetics.

"No, I think it would be best if we were more subtle and provoked some dissension," the old man went on. "They have never been very happy to trust each other, but in recent years there have been too many mergers, too many marriages, too many parties. And if we could simply make sure that they split, perhaps into several major camps instead of splintering entirely, we would still be safe. Open. And they couldn't fix prices and access and take over the kiosk trade and do all the other things they want to do."

The old man sighed heavily. He lifted his glass and looked through the garnet Chianti as if he could read the future in the wine. "And they want to kill the jazz. That is the worst of it, and that is a thing they will all agree on. They will mandate music so that we all think like them forever."

David put his fork down on the pink tablecloth. He sipped his wine while he thought. His head reeled. Here was opportunity. The Septs original function had been to keep and work in the system, the same way the roads were maintained and the parks replanted with impatiens every year. They could not be permitted stop the music, they could not limit thought and being. The very image was beyond what David could bear. Suddenly his vision, his desire, grew and became focused for the first time.

He had not imagined the system without the Septs keeping things organized, keeping the postal records. How else could someone be punished, without a Postmaster or SysAdmin to revoke privileges in the case of misuse? One upon a time there had been millions of local sites, but the Septs had been so much more efficient at the organization. And no one wanted to bother with things like "proper usage" and "harassment" anymore. Those, David was convinced, were leftover from the early days when there had been no full interactive and only a few of the elite had access. It had been a different world where people cared about things that did not concern him, like commercialism and etiquette. As if the system could be made completely profit-free or polite. Better not to pretend to try.

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But no one pretended that it was either profit-free or polite any more. The Septs lived off it and lived very well, too.

But then, the Gavrilis had made billions off riskier gambles. The Gavrilis, and himself in particular David was convinced, were much better suited to running something as stunningly huge as a few billion cybernetic lives. They had experience running everything else.

The old man waved the waiter away. No second cup of coffee, no dessert to interrupt their privacy. "So. You're meeting the Sept sister. You got the data from her, didn't you? Was it useful? Was there anything that we can use? You took a terrible risk there, you could have exposed us, destroyed us. And maybe she still will. Because once she knows that we exist and what we are she won't have any choice and neither will they. And we can't fight all the Septs together head on. This would be just the thing to create the unity that we have to break up.

"You were stupid, David. You are usually better than this. Now we're all in danger and maybe the whole world is too. Maybe we'll all be owned by the Septs by the time this is over. That's their goal. Or are you an imposter, a spy sent into my organization to destroy me? To destroy all the freedom we have left?"

He closed his eyes, not with fatigue but looking backwards into a deep past where David could not follow. "We must destroy them before they change the music forever. While the world is still alive and open, while the window remains. Otherwise we will find that we can do nothing but watch as the world reforms around us and we are caught in the change. Look at the Septs, at the access. How many identities have you created? Isn't it getting harder to establish each one? As if the system itself were fighting your anonymity, your mask. Should only the Septs have the right to mask? The mask is our mark as civilized people. It renders us all equal, it gives us choice and fluidity. It even eliminates discrimination—who can tell behind the mask who is old and who is ugly? The mask is what has made us great. And the Septs are making it harder and harder to mask. Someday they will strip the masks away entirely and we'll all be left with face-naked ID's."

David heard and didn't hear. He was too busy planning. He needed to see the Sept-Fortune apprentice and was terrified that she wouldn't show up.

He hadn't misjudged her, he was certain of it. There were moments when he had found her that he had been worried, but it never occurred to him that she might betray him now. Not when she was crucial to his plans.

He had first observed her when they were fishing in the bitstream, thought-lines cast down into the rapidly running flow that glowed with dizzying thread striations. Catching the correct thread and tracing it back to the dry land, perhaps all the way back to the library itself, was something that took great patience and training and talent. Snagging a Sept-sister without her knowledge had been even harder.

David tried to cast down a thought line into the stream. He used one of the Sept rods, a simple thing patterned on a simpler time. He drew back the long line and threw it with all his strength into the bright water. *He came up empty. He cast again and nothing bit a second time.* Then he wondered what was wrong and he realized that he had forgotten to bait his line. He considered for a moment, and then he cast once more, this time impaling an image of himself through the shiny hook.

The catch was firm. He felt as if someone had grabbed his head and wrenched him into some other level of existence. His awareness

quickly flushed from the stream and into the infosea, where he saw/heard/knew his own diffusion and inconsequence.

In this place he was nothing at all. Frustration turned to anger quickly. He was young and strong and he should be able to affect things around himself, but the information that was the matrix of the sea was liquid, infinitely adjustable. It merely eddied around him and created new paths and microcurrents in the limitless array.

And then he was lost. He felt as diffused as the reflection of himself in the matrix. He was in the mix, part of the entire sea and he lost coherent thought, for how long he could not say. When he had come out of it he was no longer in the net, but in his bed in the palazzo with late afternoon sun resting on three: dark iris in a jar. Outside the open window he could hear the measured strains of Hayden sung by one of the off-island choirs. The music and the flowers, the balance of atmosphere after the insanity of the datadate, calmed him. The terror and the anger seemed far away, locked where he could observe them without being touched. The calm had been her aura, her touch.

This state had remained constant for two days. Every morning he was wakened to songs by Mozart sung by choristers on their stately way to the workstations and palazzi of the Septs, their song setting the entire population for a productive, orderly day.

David did not enter the Sept levels for two days. He spent his time quietly, using the normal channel feeds and dutifully following major threads. He wore his own ID, his own face unmasked as he would be ashamed to walk in the streets. For two days this equilibrium held intact. Then he heard someone playing jazz in the dark hours just before dawn.

He didn't know who was playing, or even what piece it was, and that surprised him. He thought he knew the literature whole, was fluent in the variations. Only outside his window, open to admit the spring breeze, he heard an instrument he could not identify playing music that was so sad and sweet that he wanted to cry. He felt it inside himself, this music like nothing any of the choirs ever sang, like no work-group ever played during working time.

The low, sonorous sound wandered and wailed, it curled around itself in twisted loops that no program could even repeat, and then it drifted away like smoke from a cigarette.

He tried to follow it. His thoughts coiled and undulated with some pattern that never followed a datadate. It was as if some part of his brain that had never been stimulated before had been turned on and he could see things in formations that had never existed before. Or rather, he could now perceive things that had always been there under the layers of order and sanity that seemed to dictate the infosea. Now he could see that they were only the skim-layers: of organization.

Inside the sea he had been aware of something that had been built on the sensuous curves of this new music. It was regulated but free, utterly beyond the direction of the Septs and the users. It was even beyond the old man.

This was the a power he couldn't identify, and yet he knew that it was this power that had linked him to the Sept-sister. This is how they had been found, found each other. She had been something else moving, fluid and free of Hayden and Brahms. She had known his soul and had recognized him, or so he decided in this delicious moment of heady command.

The Sept-sister would come. She had to, he knew it with something like despair. The music would convince her and his evidence would show her that they had been born to rule the world together.

## Interface Masque—Part I

The old man didn't understand, but he was useful. His wraithlike followers were useful, too. Once David got Artos to give him the details so he would know where and how they got their information and where they were placed, David would be able to use them the way Artos couldn't begin to imagine.

He would do something good for the old man some day, David decided. Once this was all done, he would make sure Artos had music and masks and all the parties he could want. David was vaguely grateful for the time he had had to explore, but now it was time for him to act, time to leave the old man behind.

Artos stood up and adjusted his mask. "I hope for your sake she comes," he said. Then the old man was gone and David was alone with his hopes and fears.

It was early still, too early to go to the Luna. But David did not want to stay here and think about what the old man had said. He wanted only to be ready when she arrived, to create his new and impossible world. So he got up and checked his mask, then turned on the little power switch to make the sun blaze and sparkle.

He found that Artos had cleared the bill so he left a tip, a large tip because no one had interfered and the food had been good. Then he went to Cafe Luna on foot, hoping that the walking time would eat up the early hour and his restless energy.

Outside the city was far too friendly. Tour groups were leaving the large restaurants and groups of students moved through the streets. It was crowded and warm and everyone looked at his magnificent mask.

Someday, David thought, someday they will look at me because I am me, because I am the owner of the world, because I broke the Septs. Some day they will look at me.

He didn't realize when he thought that he had imagined his parents and the old man, not the tourists and the throng in the street. He didn't think about his family on his walk to the Cafe Luna to get lost among the crowds.

Sean paced around his living room biting his lip. He had failed again. He couldn't keep still about any of it, and now he was going to fail David as well. He walked from the oversized draped windows to the front door without seeing any of it.

He hated the apartment as he hated everything else. It had come to symbolize all the other failures. He was old enough to move out of the student dormitories, but did not rank high enough in the choir to be offered one of the beautiful apartments the Pietà owned and kept for their stars. Sean had been in one of those apartments once and remembered the antique moldings on the ceiling and the parquet floors. He would never live in a place like that, just as nothing else good would ever happen to him.

And he could never go home.

Sean had come to the Pietà late, at fifteen. Males were not permitted to audition until they had attained their adult voices for obvious reasons, but most who had the voice clamored for admission as soon as they could possibly be accepted.

No so Sean Douglas. He had been forced, sent away, exiled. His family had cut off all communication, not because they weren't proud of him but because they didn't want the authorities to trace him. Sean would still be arrested and imprisoned if he were found. The leaders he had respected had convinced him that the Pietà was safer than a convent and far more acceptable—at least for someone with a voice like Sean's.

When he was agitated he remembered everything he had left behind, only over time the memories had become softer and more alluring. He remembered the warmth of singing with his father and uncle and his uncle's girlfriend who had a voice like an angel. He didn't remember all the fights with his father and all the times his uncle had called him a disgrace to the movement and an uncontrolled child and not a disciplined freedom fighter at all.

Mostly there was just the memory of the music, and of Michael Brennan. Not of Michael's funeral, at least. He had not been permitted to go. The authorities would be looking there, his comrades told him. The authorities didn't frighten him. Mrs. Brennan did. She had gone over to his parents the night Michael had died and cursed him and dug her nails into his throat. She had threatened to turn him over herself, had said that he was responsible. She had cursed and screamed, and then in a low voice said that he had killed Michael, had led him to the movement and then lured him to the bomb site.

Sean had said nothing. He had stood there with tears running down his face knowing that it didn't matter who had done what, or who had led where.

Mrs. Brennan would never believe that it had been Michael who had turned their anger into something more organized. Michael had been the one who had contacted the underground and had brought Sean into the cell to swear his life on a Bible and a gun. The bomb had been Michael's idea, too, though they had flipped a coin to see who would deliver it.

But then, Sean would have done anything Michael wanted. It was his greatest weakness and he knew it and he dared tell no one. Especially Michael. Michael would have lost all respect for him if he'd admitted that he didn't really want to build bombs in the basement of the old firehouse. Michael needed him. And Sean had been very good at building things. Once he had wanted to be an engineer.

Sean knew he was wallowing, letting all the past hurts build the present one. The present one was bad enough. He had not gotten into the choir that was going to sing for the Board. David needed him at that meeting, needed the information as it was being discussed.

David needed him the way Michael had. And David loved him more than Michael ever had, though Sean felt guilty even thinking it. Michael was dead and had therefore become perfect. And Michael was part of home, part of all the careful, comfortable memories and the songs he sang when he was alone.

They were old songs of an old country where music was revered far more than it was here. At home people understood that music was not a scientific tool to create patterns of thought, but the center of joy and strength. There music mattered for itself and not only for what it could do.

Being here at the Pietà not only betrayed Michael and his old comrades, it betrayed music as well. The music here was never pure, never about expression and feeling. It was always about work, about productivity, and so Sean found it hollow.

The way he was hollow, the way even his rage and his insatiable insolence was at the core meaningless sham. In the end, he served nothing and believed nothing. Or so he told himself while he paced, waiting for David.

Maybe David would stay tonight. Sean had planned dinner, something simple with fish and potatoes because he had never learned to cook in the complex styles of the Continent. But then, maybe David wouldn't stay. He would probably be disappointed in

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Sean, and more concerned with the Board meeting than the dinner and Sean's hopes.

Sean thought that only fair. He had failed again and David should make him pay for the mistake.

So he paced, wondering how he was going to tell David the bad news. It scared him. He imagined that David would get angry and leave immediately, not even stay for dinner. Then he would never see David again, and would not ever really feel alive again.

He heard the footsteps on the stairs first. It was an old building and the lift was unreliable so David always took the stairs. Sean tensed, moved to the door and then back to the middle of the room, uncertain.

David knocked, ignoring the perfectly good bell, and Sean had to go open the door. He had barely closed it behind his visitor when he blurted out the bad news. Bad news never waits.

"I wasn't chosen," Sean said miserably. "I'm not in the group to go to the Board meeting and I won't be able to change that. Maybe I can find someone who would be willing to report on it but no one else has any notion of what you need. I'm sorry. I guess you'll have to find someone better."

He stood trembling in the middle of the room. David came over and put his arms around Sean. "It's not a problem," he said softly. "We'll figure things out. Now, what is it that smells so good?"



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## Frequently Unanswered Question-ing in Cyberland

by William John Watkins

I fell in love today  
along the cyberway  
soon as I heard her say,  
"C'mon, Hot Hands, let's cut the Chat and FUQ."

Some questions ought to stay  
Unanswered so they say  
but it was all in play  
and I thought I had had a stroke of luck

to find a woman who  
would do what she would do.  
Everything she said was true,  
we bared ourselves and she held nothing back.

I asked until my fingertips went numb,  
and each time she would come  
up with how she'd succumb.  
We FUQed where others merely FAQ.

The I said, "Let's get Real."  
She said, "That's not the deal.  
You know I can't reveal  
the thing that transforms cyber-life to Life."

I said I didn't care  
I'd meet her anywhere,  
for sex beyond compare.  
She said, "You know the truth's a two-edged knife."

I said I'd take the cut.  
She said, "I'll answer but,  
you'll lose your cyber-slut.  
You asked for this. In real time, I'm your wife."



# Book Reviews

## Reviews by Lucas Gregor

***Shards*, by Tom Piccirilli. Write Way Publishing, 214 pages, hardcover, \$20.95; ISBN 1-885173-23-7**

I am completely in awe of Piccirilli's ability to write. His narrative style is both powerful and intense. *Shards* is a phenomenal book, from a writer who deserves to be a giant in the field. I was snared from the opening lines:

"I would never hurt you," he said, taking me in his hand, and hurting me.

The rage coiled around my neck, soft and warm, whispering in my ear like every sin I'd ever passed on, now returning to seduce me.

Piccirilli delivers on the promises of these opening lines. This dark, brooding book is seductive and powerful. I was pulled from one scene to another, unable to escape the dark spell that was *Shards*. If you're not already a fan of Piccirilli's you will be when you finish this book. I highly recommend it.

***The Hanging Man*, by Tom Piccirilli. Wilder Publications, 40 pages, \$5.00**

*The Hanging Man* is actually a chapbook and should have been listed in the "It Came from the Small Press" section, but Piccirilli is just so damn good that I asked if I could review it along with the major books. This is a collection of five short horror stories. The horror is quite but powerful. Why this guy isn't on the best-sellers list is beyond me. Each story has a major impact and you won't put the collection down until you're finished. The title story is probably the most powerful, but I really enjoyed "Caucasus" and the Self story "Sorrow Laughed."

***Paladin of the Lost Hour*, by Harlan Ellison. The Harlan Ellison Recording Collection, 54:18, \$15.00**

Usually I'm not much on listening to recorded stories. I find that if my eyes aren't engaged with the telling of the story my mind wanders. That is not the case when it's Harlan Ellison telling the story. Aside from being one of the top writers of our times he is also one of the top storytellers. Ellison's diction, timing, and delivery are just amazing. I found myself completely engaged with this story; it was as if I had entered into Billy Kinetta's world, my passport: Ellison's magical voice.

*Paladin of the Lost Hour* is a story that answers the question: What happens to that hour we lose when we switch to daylight savings? Billy Kinetta saves the life of an old man, Gaspar, who is being mugged in a graveyard. Gaspar inserts himself into Billy's life and for the first time Billy has a friend. Gaspar is an old man and he realizes that he is dying. He asks Billy to take on an awesome responsibility.

The print form of this story made the final Nebula ballot and won the Hugo. It is powerfully and deftly written. Ellison is a master.

***Age of Wonders, Exploring the World of Science Fiction*, by David G. Hartwell. Tor Books, 319 pages, \$23.95; ISBN 0-312-86151-6**

I've always enjoyed scholarly dissertations on the science fiction field, and David G. Hartwell's *Age of Wonders* is one of the best I've found. It's aimed at explaining science fiction and the culture that has grown up around it to people who are not part of that culture. *Age of Wonders* accomplishes what it has set out to do quite nicely. Even people who are part of the science fiction culture will enjoy this one and find useful information that they might not have known.

If you're looking to understand the science fiction field and how it got to be the way that it is, you should pick this book up. The recommended reading list in the back of the book is a solid one and a very good introduction to the field.

***Starlight*, edited by Patrick Nielsen Hayden. Tor Books, 316 pages, trade paperback, \$13.95; ISBN 0-312-86215-6**

I was excited when I was assigned *Starlight* for review. The cover advertised this anthology as "Original science fiction that rekindles our sense of wonder." The sense of wonder is what hooked me on science fiction. Unfortunately this is a case of false advertising, cold and calculating it seems to me. After reading these stories the only sense of wonder I was left with was wondering why this anthology had been published in the first place.

Most of the stories were thinly disguised mainstream stories, and two of them ("The weighing of Ayre" by Gregory Feeley, and "The Ladies of Grace Adieu" by Susanna Clarke) were so bad that I can't believe that

they found publication in any form.

*Starlight 2* will be out in 1998. I hope by then Patrick Nielsen Hayden will have either decided to call this anthology what it is, an anthology of literary sf, or will actually purchase some stories that contain some "jaw-dropping wonder." We won't be fooled by the packaging twice.

***Children of the Mind* by Orson Scott Card. Tor Books, 352 pages, hardcover, \$23.95; ISBN 0-312-85395-5**

*Children of the Mind* is the fourth story in the Ender series and is advertised as the final Ender book. It may be the final book with Ender as a character, but I would be surprised from the open ending if it is the final book in this series. As with any of Card's books, the characters are very well drawn and everyone is intensely introspective. This wouldn't work for any other writer, but Card pulls off the immense amount of introspection effortlessly; though I did occasionally wonder if anyone in the book would do anything without spending a lifetime agonizing over all of the ramifications of each individual action.

The Starwars Congress has sent a fleet to destroy Ender's adopted home world, Lusitania. Ender and his friends must stop this from happening. They travel to a number of planets looking for a way out of the situation and the story moves along quite well.

One of the planets they find is the home world of the race that created the dreaded descolada virus. These beings attempt to communicate with the Lusitanian ship via a complex pattern of viruses. Somewhat reminiscent of how some bugs communicate, but much more sophisticated. The descolada creators attempt to sedate and capture the Lusitanians, but fail to because the Lusitanians don't communicate in the same manner. This part of the book was some of the most fascinating writing that Card has done in some time. Unfortunately, the book ends before we learn anything about the descolada inventors.

If this is the final book in the series, then Card has fallen down before telling us the most interesting part of the tale. If it is only the last Ender book and not the last book set in this universe, then he has done a wonderful job of pulling the reader in and future books should be quite satisfying. We'll have to wait and see.

## Absolute Magnitude

**Slow River**, by Nicola Griffith. Del Rey, 352 pages, trade paperback, \$11.00; ISBN 0-345-39537-9

When I first started reading *Slow River* and discovered it intertwined three timelines all with different tenses, I thought to myself, oh great, they've slipped me another pretentious piece of crap. I was wrong. While *Slow River* is definitely literary science fiction it isn't pretentious. The story doesn't suffer from it's presentation, and in the literary arena that is a rare thing.

The story opens with the protagonist looking out over the river remembering how she first arrived here alone and naked. This tips the reader off that all will end well, but Griffith's prose is so compelling that this is not a problem. All three time lines deal with the same person, Lore, at different times in her life. The different tenses serve to let the reader know when the focal point has changed. I didn't have any problem following this, but then I have an English degree and read an immense amount of books. Still, my sense is that any reader will be able to follow the changing tenses.

Lore is a rich heiress who is kidnaped and begins to question her life when her family fails to pay her ransom. She manages to escape, possibly killing one of her captors in the process and then, badly injured, goes to ground in the heart of a brutal city. Lore must come to terms with who she is and what she stands for before she can confront her family about their dark secrets.

The plot, the character, and the presentation of the writing all take equal importance in this book. And for my money it works beautifully. Griffith is one of those rare literary writers who is so good that even the non-literary fan can appreciate her work. I believe we're watching the beginning of an amazing career.

**Science Fiction and Fantasy Writer's Sourcebook**, edited by Dave Borcherting. Writer's Digest Books, 502 pages, hardcover, \$19.99; ISBN 0-89879-762-4

If you're a writer of fantasy or science fiction this book is a valuable source book. It has how to articles by some of the top names in the field and most of the listing for magazines are timely, something *Writer's Digest* isn't usually known for. Borcherting is the best editor that *Writer's Digest* Books has had in a long, long time.

**World-Building**, by Stephen L. Gillett. Writer's Digest Books, 198 pages, hardcover, \$16.95; ISBN 0-89879-707-1

Writer's Digest Books has launched a new Science Fiction Writing series. And this is one of the first two books. It's meant to help the neophyte writer design believable worlds. As such, it is quite welcome. I tried to use it, but found the math to be way over my head. I asked a friend who has a math degree what she thought of it; she replied that if she brushed up on some of her math it would be perfectly useable. When a book about writing has so much math that a math major has to brush up on their math, something is wrong.

**Aliens and Alien Societies** by Stanley Schmidt. Writer's Digest Books, 226 pages, hardcover, \$17.99; ISBN 0-89870-706-3

I found *Aliens and Alien Societies* to be both useful and entertaining. Schmidt is a deft writer and the information he presented to the would be writer was quite useful and very easily assimilated. I'd recommend this one to anyone wishing to write science fiction.

### Reviews by Angela Kessler

**Speak Daggers to Her**, by Rosemary Edghill. Tor, 222 pages, paperback, \$5.99; ISBN 0-812-53438-7

**Book of Moons**, by Rosemary Edghill. Forge, 220 pages, hardcover, \$20.95; ISBN 0-312-85605-9

**The Bowl of Night**, by Rosemary Edghill. Forge, 220 pages, hardcover, \$20.95; ISBN 0-312-85606-7

I hate books that begin with "Book 2 of 12" or something similar, and conclude with "The End . . . So Far," so I was delighted to find that each of these three books is complete in and of itself. They share a protagonist and continuing characters, but a reader could start with any one of these and it would make perfect sense all by itself!

The protagonist, Bast, is one of the most real and engaging characters I've encountered in quite a while. Her narrative voice is witty, introspective, and gently self-deprecating. Bast is strong yet vulnerable; she is practical and has seen enough of life to be cynical, yet she still loves life and still has some faith in herself, humanity, and Goddess. Yes, *Goddess*—Bast is a practicing Witch. As she explains briefly in the beginning of each book for those who don't know, witchcraft is nothing like the images put forth by fairy tales or fundamentalists—it's simply a neo-Pagan revival of the old earth-centered religions.

A character who's a Witch and who goes around solving murder mysteries will

inevitably be compared to Mercedes Lackey's character Diana Tregarde. While both are great characters featured in well-written mysteries, Lackey's Tregarde novels (*Burning Water*, *Children of the Night*, *Jinn: High*) have more of an element of supernatural fantasy. Edghill's Bast novels are set in the everyday "real" world—none of the storybook magic that Bast refers to as "The Magic Power of Witchcraft" here: Bast must make do with only her own intuition, not having Tregarde's impressive psionic powers—but her characters, and her stories, are all the stronger because of it.

In the first Bast novel, *Speak Daggers to Her*, an acquaintance calls Bast to ask for her help, then suddenly and mysteriously drops dead—a rather unnatural death apparently from "natural causes," perhaps helped along by black magic. Since Wiccans don't use black magic—the first rule of Wicca is "Harm none," and besides, the principle of Triple Retribution ("What you send out returns three times over") means that doing something nasty to someone just isn't worth it—Bast starts looking around the wider Pagan/occult community to find the (possible) killer and hopefully bring him or her to justice. Of course, she puts herself in harm's way in the process . . .

The second novel, *Book of Moons*, begins with a rare rash of thefts in the Pagan community, and in each case the item stolen was a Book of Shadows. Each Witch has a personal Book of Shadows—"part recipe book, part liturgy, and part magical diary." Someone is looking for a very old, very valuable Book of Shadows—the Book of Moons of Mary, Queen of Scots—and is willing to lie, steal, and even kill for it. Bast once again risks her own safety in her quest to catch the killer—before he catches her!

The latest, *The Bowl of Night*, takes place at Halloween, a yearly Pagan festival held in October in upstate New York. Bast arrives in the company of Julian, her "clandestine lust object, and . . . manager of New York's oldest and tackiest occult bookstore"; on a solitary stroll around the campground early the next morning, she discovers the body of Hellfire Harm, a local fundamentalist preacher who always protested the yearly "unholy forgerathering of Satanic Witches and Imps of Satan," as he imagined Halloween to be, and who appears to have been ritually murdered. Although some of the locals have at least as much reason as any of the visiting Pagans to want him dead, Bast feels honor-bound to help the police solve the mystery in order to clear up the cloud of suspicion hanging over the whole gathering. This time she does manage to rein in her catlike curiosity enough to keep herself out

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of danger; as a reader I had to applaud her newfound wisdom and caution!

Edgill's method is to drop the reader lots of hints about whodunit (especially in the first two novels), leaving the reader to figure out *how* and *why*—which can be much more interesting questions than *who*.

All in all, these three books were thoroughly enjoyable page-turners. The latest, in particular, provides an insightful, good-humored look at the Pagan community in all its diversity, featuring such memorable, offbeat, and colorful characters as a coven of Klingons and Xharina, "Princess of Pain," a dominatrix with a coven of a dozen male submissives, along with the regular Goddess-worshippers and nature-lovers.

While each of the books does stand alone nicely, I was glad that I got to read them all together and in sequence, because the characters become even deeper and more real as the series progresses, and I enjoyed getting to know Bast and her friends in this way. If your local bookstore only has the latest one in stock, by all means go ahead and read it while you wait for them to fill your order for the others. But do read all three: if you like good mysteries and strong yet very human protagonists, you won't be disappointed.

### Reviews by Pam Meek

*Cybersong*, by S. N. Lewitt. Pocket Books, 277 pages, paperback, \$5.99; ISBN 0-671-56783-7

S. N. Lewitt (a.k.a. Shariann Lewitt, author of the popular *Songs of Chaos and Memento Mori*), has written the first Star Trek novel in years that has kept me hungrily devouring it to the last page. The characters were vibrant and believably human, flaws included. Lewitt has a gift of making the reader care about the fact that *Voyager* is truly stranded a long way from home. In one subplot, the food on board *Voyager* begins to spoil. The slow starvation of the crew adds an insidious urgency to the story, while subtly reminding us how very perilous a situation *Voyager* labors under. The plot itself was rife with twists and subplots in the most wonderfully unexpected of places, that will leave the reader guessing until the end.

Lewitt's novel proves that *Star Trek: Voyager* has the potential to be as good as the other members of the Star Trek family. I hope that we see more writing of this caliber from the Star Trek line in the future.

*In Celebration of Lammas Night*, based on a song by Mercedes Lackey, edited by Josepha Sherman. Baen Books, 282 pages, paperback, \$5.99; ISBN 0-671-87713-5

*In Celebration of Lammas Night* is an interesting collection of short stories by various authors, a tribute to a song written by Mercedes Lackey several years ago. The song presents a fascinating scenario: a female wizard comes to a town and discovers that the former wizard has been killed by an unknown entity. Finding the job vacant, she takes over, only to come to the conclusion that the former occupant of the job is still present as a ghost. Through various means, she is presented with two spells, exactly the same save one word. One spell will banish the spirit, one will return him to flesh. It is this choice and the basis for making it that form the backbone of each story.

Editor Josepha Sherman has done a masterful job of choosing and arranging the stories comprising the book; the majority of the tales are crisp, and the outcome truly matters to the reader. Unfortunately, there are only so many ways to retell a story. Sherman deals with this problem by placing stories that follow the original song less closely in the second half of the book in order to sustain the reader's interest.

Unfortunately, the song's greatest strength, its ambiguous ending, becomes the frustrating downfall of the book: Imagine reading eighteen stories that simply end, completely failing to have a resolution. In addition, Sherman's strategy was undermined by allowing Mercedes Lackey to write a prose version of her song and then placing it first in the book, thus setting it up as the definitive version despite its lack of resolution; it would have been better placed at the end for this reason. The writing overall is of excellent quality, and the premise is fresh and new, but if you hate Lady and the Tiger endings, this book is definitely not for you.

*The Crystal Singer Trilogy*, by Anne McCaffrey. Del Rey Books, 660 pages, trade paperback, \$16.00; ISBN 0-345-40292-8

I am a devoted fan of Anne McCaffrey. But in *Crystal Singer* she managed to create one of the most annoying, self-centered and shallow characters I have read. Nevertheless, the book's premise intrigued me.

*Crystal Singer* details the adventures of voice student Killashandra Ree who, upon being told her voice is inherently flawed, leaves her school of ten years to examine her

other options. She meets a crystal singer, someone who "cuts" crystal with his voice, and learns that she has the appropriate qualifications. Crystal singing is considered hazardous, dangerous work, but crystal is needed for a variety of things, including the technology on which starships are based. Crystal singers are held in high respect and regarded with a great deal of fear, things which feed Killashandra's megalomania nicely. The story is saved by the intriguing relationship Killashandra has with crystal, and her trials in coming to terms with her new life.

Nevertheless, I almost didn't pick up *Killashandra* when it came out a few years later. *Killashandra*, however, is without a doubt one of the best non-Pern books McCaffrey has published to date. Killashandra's character is humbled by a series of losses, and she is forced to take a meager job off planet installing crystal on Ophtheria. The megalomania is tempered into a strong belief in herself, and a rich, wry humor and caustic, biting wit that simply will not allow anyone to take her for granted. Her character is made more human when she falls in love with Lars Dahl. The ending is somewhat saccharine for science fiction, but overall this book was simply a delightful read.

It was with a great deal of trepidation that I sat down to read *Crystal Line*, because I was afraid that McCaffrey would not be able to repeat the success of *Killashandra*. Unfortunately, I was right. The old Killashandra is back, shallow and annoying as ever, and McCaffrey conveniently allows her the excuse of "forgetting," which is the bane of every crystal singer. She has forgotten the lessons which made her such a rich personality. Midway through the book, the reader develops a strong desire to explain to Lars that he needs to get a life, instead of waiting for Killashandra to remember that she is supposed to be in love with him. At this point, the story quality becomes schizophrenic: while on Ballybran, it is rich and full as Lars finally takes action and attempts to discover ways to restore a Crystal Singer's memory; but when the scene shifts off planet, the writing details, and the plot becomes clichéd and predictable, two things I never thought to ascribe to the Dragonlady of Pern. By the last third of the book, McCaffrey makes a dramatic recovery in quality, the end is equal to the richness of the second book in the trilogy. Killashandra gets her memory back completely by accident, and this, coupled with a starship accident in which she believes Lars to be dead, makes up for the



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somewhat hesitant start, and allows the trilogy as a whole to finish on a dramatic and triumphant note.

***The Secrets of Star Wars: Shadows of the Empire*, by Mark Cotta Vaz. Del Rey Books, 299 pages, trade paperback, \$15.00; ISBN 0-345-40236-7**

*Shadows of the Empire* marks a new era for the Star Wars saga. In it, a variety of media are brought together for the first time to create a large complex storyline woven into the events in *The Empire Strikes Back*. It is a bold effort on the part of Bantam Books, Dark Horse Comics, and LucasArts to create a new storyline that expands on the original. *The Secrets of Star Wars: Shadows of the Empire* is a fascinating insider look into the making of this historic undertaking.

Mark Cotta Vaz has done an outstanding job, looking not only at *Shadows* itself, but also in creating a comprehensive overview of the background of the Star Wars trilogy. The book begins by examining how the tremendous amounts of material provided by role-playing games, novels, comics and the films themselves had to be examined. By providing this information, Vaz succeeds in conveying an appreciation for the enormous amounts of research that went into this project to weave a storyline continuous with what has already been written.

Vaz goes on to detail how each phase of *Shadows* was planned and created. He examines with honesty what problems each group, interactive games, books and comics encountered, and what was done to solve those problems. The book has been lovingly crafted, and it is rich with rough drafts, examples of artists sketches for both book covers and comics strips. As an additional bonus, a character, location, and vehicle guide is included. This is a must-read for anyone, young or old, who loves any aspect of *Star Wars*!

### Review by Lucas Morton

***Ribofunk*, by Paul Di Filippo. Four Walls Eight Windows, 295 pages, \$20.00; ISBN 1-56858-062-2**

WARNING: I'm going to rant and rave about this one!

The first story in *Ribofunk*, "One Night in Television City," almost made me put this collection away. Fortunately I managed to wade through the morass of jargon on the first page or two, and find that I really like Di Filippo's style. In this one story, Di Filippo

uses more genre-specific jargon than I have seen even William Gibson use, but fortunately I started to pick up on what it meant rather quickly. "One Night in Television City" turned out to be quite a wild ride.

I am not sure it would really do Di Filippo justice to compare his writing to Gibson's, but I think there are enough similarities to do so. While Gibson writes in a gloomy, over-technology-crazed world, Di Filippo writes of an only occasionally gloomy, biotechnology-crazed world. Where Gibson would use muscle grafts, Di Filippo uses "myofiber booster," a synthesized organic tailored to boost muscle power. When Gibson wants a character to have more brain power, he gives them a skull socket full of "sofs." Di Filippo is a bit more subtle; he'd grow an AI and give the character a link to it. In Gibson's work, technology often pushes man down. Di Filippo's biotechnology tends to lift man up, using "splices" (often heavily modified animals, a bit human, a lot something else) for the drudge jobs.

Despite all of the above, Di Filippo's world is not without problems. The splices are often more intelligent than a low-end human, and are slaves. A splice can be made for any job one could imagine: guard, accountant, sex toy, you name it. There is also the problem of biotechnology run amok.

As the stories progress, biotechnology gets more and more pervasive, all building up to a finale that I found somewhat disappointing. I really hope that the final story is not a world-killer. It may just be a *monster* world-shifter, enabling the author to start with a cleanish slate. I, for one, sure hope so.

In brief: While a little hard to get started on, the stories, characters, and world are very well done. I am an avid Gibson reader, and despite the great differences between Gibson and Di Filippo, I think *Ribofunk* will appeal to the cyberpunk reader. It's slick, for the most part fast-moving, and has some great uses and abuses of bio/nanotechnology. I have the feeling that if you get this book, the only disappointment you might have is that it is not longer.

### Reviews by Leigh Grossman

***Midshipman's Hope* by David Feintuch. Aspect, 391 pages, paperback, \$5.50; ISBN 0-446-60096-2**

***Challenger's Hope* by David Feintuch. Aspect, 407 pages, paperback, \$5.50; ISBN 0-446-60097-0**

***Prisoner's Hope* by David Feintuch. Aspect, 506 pages, paperback, \$5.50; ISBN 0-446-60098-9**

***Fisherman's Hope* by David Feintuch. Aspect, 482 pages, paperback, \$5.99; ISBN 0-446-60099-7**

There are a lot of things to recommend David Feintuch's four Nicholas Searfort novels (there is a fifth novel out featuring the character's son, but it is set much later, and the cycle is clearly complete with the four books), so I tend to be a little forgiving of the series's considerable flaws. The first novel in particular, *Midshipman's Hope*, is very roughly written in places, but it is excellent conceptually and well plotted. By the fourth book, *Fisherman's Hope*, Feintuch's control of his writing has improved dramatically.

The series is a very conscious tribute to C. S. Forester's inasterful Horatio Hornblower novels, and by and large Feintuch manages to pull it off. Like Hornblower, Nicholas Searfort is a hero so inwardly tortured that all of his outward success is meaningless to him; in a sense, his heroism and devotion to duty are the vehicles for his own suffering. The central conflict of the series is between the character's duty to God and his duty to the navy, and the violation of either one—invariably over the course of his career—puts his soul at peril. Religion is seldom treated with the complexity it deserves in genre fiction; too often religion is just a source of evil priests or fanatical killers. While Feintuch's work lacks the depth of Walter M. Miller Jr., it treats religion as a serious and crucial facet of the characters' lives, sometimes positive, sometimes negative, but either way a factor in how characters think of themselves and the people around them.

I may as well mention the flaws of the series first, since they can be glaring and distracting at times, and I intend to spend the rest of the review saying nice things about the books. Three things jump out at readers immediately in the first book, problems that (by and large) gradually diminish over the course of the series.

- Feintuch has clearly never served in the military. Leaving aside issues of characterization and of whether the future he presents is believable, the naval personnel do not always seem believable as naval personnel.

- The female characters don't ring true at all, particularly the love interests. And the sex scenes are particularly bad, reading like

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*Penthouse*-esque or staged movie scenes and not like something people would enjoy, or indeed, willingly participate in.

• There is far too much spanking in these books. Perhaps this last point needs a bit of background explanation. The world of the future is dominated by the United Nations, which is now a quasi-religious organization. Attempts at universal education have been abandoned, as well as many urban areas—which are now controlled by gang cultures. There are tremendous economic and social divisions between the educated and the uneducated. Although faster than light travel exists, round-trip voyages between Earth and its colonies still take several years. The only interstellar craft are UN military ships. Because of the length and hardship involved in space voyages, the military has absolute power over all passengers and cargo. Because enlisted personnel are drawn from the ranks of the uneducated, the navy has instituted a brutal system of punishments based on, I suppose, Feintuch's interpretation of eighteenth century naval fiction. The junior officers—who begin their naval careers in their young teens—are not immune from this system. The practical upshot of all this seems to be that the midshipmen get spanked a lot.

In *Midshipman's Hope*, Nicholas Seafort is a seventeen-year-old midshipman on the UNS *Hibernia*. A series of disasters leaves him the senior line officer alive on board the ship. Naval regulations demand that he assume complete control, although he does not feel that he is qualified for the role—and most of the ship's passengers and crew don't think so either. Every decision which follows is magnified by Seafort's age and inexperience—he has to fight to enforce orders that would be followed unquestioningly from an older officer as the troubled voyage continues. Seafort, the product of a rigid (basically Calvinist) upbringing, cannot tolerate any less than perfection from himself, and is tortured by his perceived failures costing the lives of the men around him. Although the people around him come to see his exceptional abilities as a commanding officer, he is able to focus only on his failures, and the measure of peace he gains at the end of the novel clearly will not last for long.

*Midshipman's Hope* is a very tightly plotted novel, particularly for a first novel. The pressure remains heavy throughout, and the frequent twists and turns are believable and nicely set up. Feintuch has a nice touch with the male characters and younger

characters, and he's never afraid to kill off sympathetic characters if it's necessary to his story. The series is told entirely in the first person, but as the series gets going, Feintuch has enough of a feel for his primary character that we are able to see not only Seafort's self-torture, but also the things Seafort is incapable of seeing or understanding: the love and respect of the officers who serve under him.

*Challenger's Hope* tells the story of Nicholas Seafort's second voyage, in which he is forced into the decision that, in his own mind, irrevocably damns his soul. After tragedy befalls his wife and child (another echo of C. S. Forester), in the midst of an interstellar war against—I am not making this up—creatures that look like space goldfish, Seafort is abandoned on a crippled ship by a cowardly admiral, along with a shipload of troublesome passengers and crewmen the admiral was anxious to be rid of. Seafort must overcome his own sense of hopelessness and mold the unwilling castaways into a crew capable of fighting to survive. While the writing in *Challenger's Hope* is stronger than in the first book in the series, the story itself is a little less strong; the book is very much a long setup for the unwinnable dilemma between duty and honor which Seafort must face, and which he cannot possibly come through intact.

In *Prisoner's Hope*, a physically and emotionally scarred Seafort finds himself stranded as the ranking naval officer on a crumbling colony under siege, where many of the people he is assigned to protect are trying to kill him. At the same time, he suffers through a series of physical and emotional disasters: he is badly injured twice; he is denied a ship because of his emotional state; one of his few friends loses his memory, while another refuses to speak to him; his second wife betrays him and later is viciously assaulted, at least partially because of his own anger and negligence. Despite all of these things, and despite his sense that he has already lost all honor, Seafort must hold himself together and do all he can to save the colony; his devotion to duty is the only thing he has left. But gradually he comes to realize that the only possible hope of saving the colony lies through the greatest betrayal of all: he must violate the most fundamental part of the oath he has sworn to the UN.

*Fisherman's Hope* is a rarity in the genre: a novel about a hero after his greatest moments have passed. Seafort is a tremendous heroic figure to humanity at large, but internally he has betrayed everything he was

raised to believe in. He has been robbed of the chance to die heroically by his closest friend's sacrifice—leaving him with the blood of yet another friend on his conscience. The navy, anxious to retain its troubled hero, appoints him commandant of the Naval Academy, which will allow him to stay close to his increasingly distant wife and the continuing medical care she needs. At the academy, despite the presence of endless interfering politicians, Seafort begins to find, if not peace, at least a measure of accommodation with his own sins. But when aliens attack the solar system in force and overwhelm the UN's naval squadrons, only Seafort knows how to overcome them. And his solution involves betraying the very people who trust him the most, and to whom he owes what little redemption he has gained.

### Reviews by Stephen Pagel

*Voices of Hope* by David Feintuch. Aspect, 527 pages, paperback, \$5.99; ISBN 0-446-60333-3

In *Voices of Hope*, David Feintuch once again returns to his Hope Saga. This time, however, the story is set on the planet Earth. The rich have decided that the poor no longer need water and the poor have decided that enough is enough. It is into this mix that Philip Seafort, son of Nicholas, falls when he goes to the poorest district to find a lost friend. Events take on a life of their own and certain powerful people decide that it is time to bring down the towers. Nicholas must enter into the bowels of the city to find his son.

David Feintuch's Earth is both real and unreal. If you've ever walked down the streets of one of our major cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago, or especially New York then you know what I mean. Unfortunately it is very easy to see the present day Earth becoming the one depicted in *Voices of Hope*. Feintuch's Earth is not a place I would enjoy visiting and yet his characters are some of the most compelling people that I've ever met.

*Night Sky Mine*, by Melissa Scott  
Tor Books, 384 pages, hardcover, \$24.95; ISBN 0-312-85875-2

I have read every novel that Melissa Scott has written. Her ability to blend dynamic high-tech societies with realistic characters is uncanny. She can blend cyber concepts with futuristic societies and make you feel right at home without using large chunks of exposition. And with each novel she has taken on new concepts to share with her readers.

## Absolute Magnitude

In *Night Sky Mine* we are introduced to two couples: an adolescent pair, Stinne and Ista, and an older gay couple, Tarasov and Rangsey. Stinne is a rich company girl and Ista is a Traveller, basically a gypsy. They are young and inexperienced with their emotions, so their blossoming relationship is not clear-cut. Scott handles this conflict with poise and depth. Eventually Ista and Stinne must go to Tarasov and Rangsey for help to solve the mystery of the "wild net." And perhaps along the way they can find answers to more personal questions.

This hard science fiction novel deals with class struggle in and out of the cyberspace world. I highly recommend it.

### *Otherland Vol. 1, City of Golden Shadow*, by Tad Williams. DAW Books

Tad Williams, the New York Times best-selling author of *To Green Angel Tower*, has created a new world for us to play in: Otherland. In this new series Tad Williams combines the visual aspects of fantasy with the fast pace of virtual reality. Otherworld is a VR world so intense that the line between reality and unreality is nonexistent. You can only catch glimpses of reality as you travel through the net.

There is trouble on the nets: a number of the children who enter are unable to exit, and their bodies lie in comas. Renie's brother is one of the lost. She along with one of her students, Xabbu, a bushman, must put together the pieces of this virtual puzzle and enter the virtual darkness to save his life. They will meet others in the nets who may or may not be friends: Orlando, fourteen and dying, who plays Thargor the invincible barbarian, and Mr. Sellers, an old man with many secrets.

*Otherland* is a wonderful mixture of visual imagery and movement. Once again Tad Williams paints us a picture so vivid and real that it becomes three-dimensional. I highly recommend *Otherland* to anyone who enjoys great fantasy, an unusual mystery, or worlds of virtual reality.

### *Sword of Truth Vol. #3, Blood of the Fold*, by Terry Goodkind. Tor Books, 464 pages, hardcover, \$25.95; ISBN 0-312-8905-2-4

After reading Terry Goodkind's *Blood of the Fold*, I have two complaints: It's not long enough, and I'll have to wait a year or so for the next one. This book combines Goodkind's usual captivating characters and vivid and colorful settings with a greater control of pacing and stronger prose for a

remarkable and fantastically enjoyable read. Have you ever ridden Space Mountain at Disney World? It's a roller coaster ride through pitch darkness; bursts of light make you look to one side as you are twisted to the other, or look up just before you plummet downward. This book is like that: Just when you think you know what's going on or you begin to have an idea of where you are going, it shoots you off in a new direction and you're on another adventure full of joy and surprises.

All of our favorite characters are back from the prior books, with a few new ones worked intricately into the plot. I don't want to give away too many of the surprises that unfold, but I will tell you that Richard decides to break the Alliance of the Midlands and take over where his father left off, becoming the new Lord Rahl, Master of the Dhara, with plans to conquer the world. And yes, if you are wondering, there is a Wizards' Third Rule—which I won't violate by telling you what it is! Read it and find out!

### Reviews by Joe Mayhew

#### *Blue Mars*, by Kim Stanley Robinson. Bantam Books, 624 pages, hardcover, \$22.95; ISBN 0553-10114-7

This third volume of Robinson's landmark Mars trilogy leaves the reader little doubt that Robinson has been there—on Mars—for Robinson writes with the authority of one who has personally explored the most Mars-like places on this Earth. With each volume, Robinson injects his readers deeper into his vast, Mitcheneresque mega-history of the terraforming of Mars.

*Blue Mars* carries the story into an era when mankind can breathe the Martian (or Arian) atmosphere below a set altitude. The generations born on Mars have adapted so completely to their home planet that when Mars born Nirgal visits his ancestral planet, Earth, he finds the gravity and atmosphere oppressive.

Much of the story is focused through the militant Red, Ann, who wants to preserve as much of the prehuman Mars as possible, contrasted with Sax Russell, the ultimate terraforming Green who expresses Robinson's underlying utopian concept, "Science is politics by other means." In Robinson's Mars trilogy, science itself is the greatest political force. Scientific applications have won the Martians independence from Earth, have transformed the face of their new planet, and are subtly applied to get around the political obstinacy of the Reds.

Robinson has written a great scientific romance, an adventure of human genius conflict with alien nature, dangerous but charged with epic splendor. At times he ruminates on everything from string theory to biological engineering with the intense consciousness of a solitary long-distance runner debating as many sides of as many ideas as can surge inside his blood stream. This is not a book for the lazy, but it is great adventure from a man who has really done a lot of the things about which he writes so vividly. But there is a flaw. His life-extended characters, who people more than 200 years of this history of the terraforming of Mars, too often stand so close to the camera that their personal quirks become tedious and their credibility is weakened by too many coincidences and moments of greatness. Yet this is a major book for readers in love with the romance of science; while frustration with Robinson's characters may make them put these hefty volumes down, they will pick these books up again and again until the last few pages remain, when they will surely lament that there aren't more pages to come.

#### *Starbourne*, by Robert Silverberg. Bantam, 304 pages, hardcover, \$22.95; ISBN 0-553-10264-8

A listless planet Earth has somehow summoned up the energy to send out the *Wotan*, a starship which, as the story opens, has already traveled 16 light-years through the tube of non-Euclidian, non-Einsteinian "nospace" during the first five months of its mission to find a new Earth for the race. The ship is staffed with fifty exceptional hand-picked scientists, lead by the protagonist, their elected year-captain.

The *Wotan* is carrying a bevy of frozen embryos, eggs, sperm, and the means to explore, colonize, or even terraform any near-miss planet they may find along the mysterious para-matter tunnel. Their link with Earth is Noelle, a blind woman whose telepathic communication to her twin sister Yvonne is instantaneous, even across the light years. The year-captain must fight off a growing attraction to Noelle. He fears that romantic involvement might jeopardize her telepathic link, and he fears taking unfair advantage of her.

Silverberg uses the crew's growing obsession with Go, an Oriental space-capturing game, as a sort of metaphor not only for the crew's drive to expand and conquer the universe for mankind but also for the underlying fact that the very expansionist

## Book Reviews

expedition seems to be a game Earth is playing for the sake of entertainment. Silverberg's slow, deliberate, emotional development of his characters, contrasts against the abstract cold isolation of the *Wotan* as it accelerates onward through nospaces. While *Starbourne* is not one of Silverberg's best tales, it certainly has the polish and excitement one expects from one of SF's best writers.

**Holy Fire**, by Bruce Sterling. Bantam, 304 pages, hardcover, \$22.55;  
ISBN 0-553-09958-2

Mia Ziemann, a ninety-four-year-old Californian medical economist, is a member of the "gerontocracy" which has emerged to run the world after years of plague and chaos. The story opens with her visit to the deathbed of her college sweetheart whom she hadn't seen for fifty years. He leaves her a bizarre virtual palace and awakens in her a restlessness. When she is selected for a radical new rejuvenation process she emerges not only in a youthful body but with a touch of the "holy fire" that sometimes destructive energy which drives artists to creation and

often to madness. Mia's home-safe discrete values have been wiped away with her wrinkles and arteriosclerosis. So, like Dr. Jekyll transformed into Mr. Hyde, she goes on a toot. Casting off all the medical surveillance gadgetry of her "recovery," she takes an anonymous plane seat to Europe and begins a *wonderjahr* as Maya which would have surely shocked the former Mia. She wallows with trendy Eurotrash, poseurs, frauds, and thieves. In time she hooks up with the couture industry and becomes a Cinderella-like wonder model and finds an altar for her "holy fire" in still photography.

Mia's trip is a mad exploration of cyberpunk gone thirty-something and beyond. Her progress across the seedy, self-absorbed art world of old Europe wildly dismantles the values of the staid world she has left behind. Sterling lets you see its absurdity through her Alice-like innocence, but without ratifying the gerontocracy she has left behind. He exposes the pimply bottom of the cyber-wonderland clichés which have trivialized cyberpunk.

Sterling is a careful writer who can make his ideas stick to the ribs of your mind. In a wonderfully bizarre scene in which Maya/Mia

assists at the suicide of a mafioso, Sterling writes, "Bruno looked truly feral. He looked old and beaten, too, like a very sick wolf. He looked as if he had chewed off his own leg and eaten it and enjoyed the flavor."

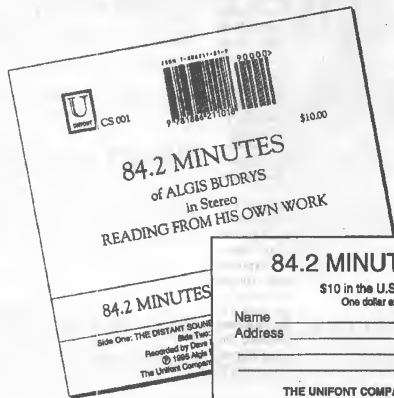
IT CAME FROM THE SMALL PRESS

**Fletcher in a Circle**, by Frank O. Dodge. Wilder Publications, 76 pages, paperback, \$6.95; ISBN 0-9640168-6-9  
PO Box 707, Greenfield MA 01302-0707

This is only Wilder Publications' second project, but it is already clear that they plan to lead the small press. Dodge is one of the best and most prolific writers in the small press. This collection is reminiscent of the old *Weird Tales* and *Amazing* pulp days. If you love classic urban fantasy, this book's for you.



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THE UNIFONT COMPANY, INC., Box 6038, Evanston IL 60204

Some of you may remember that Gene Koryko wrote a story to go with an existing cover painting for **Absolute Magnitude** #1. Gene takes us back to that world with this story, inspired by this issue's cover painting. Gene's work has appeared in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* and *Tomorrow*.

## In the Misty Days of Steel Men

by Gene Koryko

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At first, Borax knew only pain and the dream. The dream bothered him most, because he knew it was a dream. And being a dream it kept him from reality.

So he concentrated on the pain.

The pain was real.

And the motion.

He was floating, arms flayed outward, legs spread. He could feel his chest move as he breathed, but there was something strange about the air. As if he breathed water.

He realized his eyes were closed, as if in protection. If he couldn't see it, it couldn't hurt him. Silly thought for a grown man, and he forced his lids open with an act of will.

The fluid was pink and he almost panicked, thinking it was blood. But it didn't taste like blood; it tasted of the sea of Ri. High in mineral content. Salty. The planet's blood, he thought. As though Ri had been sliced open and poured through his body.

He sought the sun. Ri should have risen by now, over the sea of its name. . . But he found only diffuse shadow, a watery grave in which he floated on unscen tides.

He tried to remember, back past the floating.

And he remembered Jorad, leering. Cold eyes of green over the blue-edged Monte cards. They'd been playing a game for high stakes, and Jorad was raising him. Borax had wiped the expression from his own face. He had him beat, he knew it.

The look in Jorad's eyes said differently.

And then—

Light exploded in one long shaft, and Borax blinked. Until that moment he hadn't realized his eyes were still open. His right eye registered normal light, but his left saw red. He blinked, thinking to clear his vision, but the shaft came back the same: red on one side and clear on the other.

He heard voices then and kicked his feet towards the sound. Gently, Borax bumped against the side of the tank.

No.

Only the dead or dying were placed in the Rejuv Tanks—what was he doing here?

He let himself float toward the surface, toward the sound, then flattened out as if he were a dead fish.

"We shouldn't be takin' a break now," a voice said. It was low and husky and unfamiliar.

"Ah, he's still out," another voice said.

There was a pause, the flare of a synthesizer as one man lit up.

The first voice spoke again: "We have to place the obedience chip before he comes out of it."

"I said he's out. Relax."

Borax floated in a sea of mineral blood. Dead, think dead, he thought.

The cone of light blinked out.

Borax watched the flare of synthesizers and floated closer.

Voices floated down. . .

He kicked his feet hard and rose from the edge of the tank. Their backs were to him and he took the one on the left first, smashing his fist behind the man's ear. The second rose up, startled, and reached for his blaster, but Borax caught him hard on the chin and the man crumpled like a fetish doll sold at market.

Borax pulled himself over the lip of the tank. Water the color of blood ran from his body and he vomited water from his lungs. His left side felt heavy. . . strange.

He looked down at himself.

They'd changed him.

His left side was steel, bright and red and polished. . .

Gods of Ri. What had they done to him?

And why?

In an adjoining locker room, he found clothes: a pair of jeans and snakeskin boots. They must have belonged to one of his keepers. They fit well enough. But a shirt was impossible. Instead of a left hand, they'd fitted him with a pneumatic blaster. It wouldn't fit through a shirt sleeve. He thought of tearing one off at the shoulders, then gave it up and went bare chested. He didn't have time to fool around with the niceties of dress. He had to find Jorad.

Jorad was all he could remember.

Not quite, he realized. There were flashes of a job he had been doing. Something to do with organ thieves. But that only came in flashes through his mind, like a broken reel of film.

He abandoned the tank room and hit the streets.

The last red light of Ri poured down the streets of Port City, fragmenting into colored splinters among the carts and shop fronts of the peddlers. Hawkers screamed, "Krillich and snapper, freshly caught," and the last throngs of workers made their purchases. The thought of food stirred no hunger pangs, and he wondered if he had a stomach left.

Borax hugged the buildings leading to the square. The square was a giant plaza, a four-sided hub that fronted on the Sea of Ri. It was Port City's market place. Anything could be bought here. For a price.

Except my flesh, he thought. They'd already taken that from him. He couldn't buy it back. Against the rough brick of the marketplace, he squeezed his body tight. Strangely, he thought, there was feeling in his left side. A slight numbness, but underneath that real feeling. He wondered how deep the metal went. Had they removed his organs on that side and replaced them with sophisticated electronics? Useless to wonder. And still, it gave him mind purchase upon sanity. He'd go mad unless he tried to analyze it.

## Absolute Magnitude

The pain had subsided. It gave him a moment to examine the dream.

In the dream there had been a man with long white hair; he wore it pulled back in a pony tail. And his eyes were eyes of fire, almost amber as they reflected some sheen of light overhead. The man had been lecturing a room full of Blues, mechanical busters with peaked bird faces. The faces had turned on Borax, each tweeting its electronic code like a field full of thorn birds. The shrill intensity of it had almost driven Borax mad. He held his ears as he fell and fell and . . .

The flickering of neon night lights broke into his vision and Borax froze, alert. Real Blues were patrolling the square in twos. They seemed to be searching the stalls there, poking down each man-made alley, questioning the hawkers.

He hugged the building's shadow.

The neon lights played off the Blues' steel faces, flickering and buzzing like colored insects. They seemed to leer and twitter.

Borax waited as they passed, not breathing.

Were they searching for him or just patrolling?

No way to know, but he couldn't let them see him. A man half steel with a blaster for a left hand would surely attract too much attention.

Hugging the wall he realized he had two sets of sensory impressions. One side of him smelled brick and mortar teased by the air from the sea. The other side smelled something entirely different. Unnamable odors not of the flesh, as though the electronic structure were being disassembled and reassembled in a new part of his brain.

What had they done to his brain?

He shivered, not wanting to think about it.

The Blues cruised by, twittering to each other in computerese. Their steel faces held no expression. But on their hips, the heavy pulse guns rested. As though waiting for their moment.

Off the Plaza, streets radiated like the spokes of a wheel, oddly non-alphabetical, as though their namers had picked them at random: Amaranth, Ocean, River, and Mist. River Street was what he wanted, he was sure. He believed in dreams and his dream had held a man with white hair. The only man he knew of with white hair was . . . No. It couldn't be.

He needed to find out more about himself.

The head of River Street held the Tanaka Complex, a great pyramid of a building built from native stone. Some said it was built with slave labor, but that may have been a Port City myth. The Tanaka Complex was also the Hall of Records. The head of Experimental Division.

Borax shook his head. How did he know that? His memory was like a circuit that connected and then shorted out. He couldn't trust it. Still, he had to do something. Up the street the Blues had turned and were making their way back toward him.

He moved off.

A heavy mist was coming off the sea. Waves of it licked like heavy lace between Borax and the Blues as he made his way through the Plaza, then up River Street. The street was long and windy, surrounded on each side by Worker's tenements. The tens were rich on River Street, he thought. Six stories tall and orderly. They marched up River like toy soldiers.

A memory tickled his mind. A young girl with black hair and eyes the color of the sea. She had a wide, laughing mouth, and her eyes gathered the dying light of Ri as she spoke. They were in her ten, he realized, and they'd just made love. Lying across the bed they were eating cheese and largo root crackers.

"If you catch the thieves, maybe we can move to a new ten," she said. Her smile was playful yet thoughtful.

In his mind her smile died, but the memories flooded. There had been an outbreak of murder and organ theft along the docks. Old man Semuta had hired him to solve them. That's what he'd been doing when—

The memories shut down, like a circuit going off.

"Damn," he whispered.

The mist grew heavier as he trudged up River. In the distance he could just make out the outline of a pyramid.

The Blues stood one to a side of the great pyramid door. Borax stood below and to their left, hidden by the mist. He scabbled around on the side of the street and picked up a handful of stones. Taking careful aim, he pitched for a window ten feet to their right.

Glass tinkled.

The Blues jerked to attention.

They twittered.

Moved close to each other.

Scanned the street.

Borax stood still as stone.

The Blue on the right moved down the steps and off to the right.

Borax saw him disappear in the fog.

He moved up behind the remaining Blue.

But something snapped beneath his heel, and the Blue spun, drawing his pulse gun. Something snapped again but this time it was in Borax's mind. He leveled the big blaster that served as his left hand and fired with a thought.

The Blue flared for a second, then collapsed.

Well, now he'd done it. Killing a Blue was a capital offense.

He stepped toward him quickly and tried the door—heard a scraping behind himself and turned, firing once more. The other Blue collapsed like a bundle of rags.

They can only hang me once, he thought.

He went through the doors.

Inside there was cubicle after cubicle, like a honeycomb, all computerized. Borax picked a cubicle and typed in his personal code. The code came from a memory embedded since childhood—everyone was given one at birth. He typed the code automatically, watching his right hand fly over the keypad.

His file came up with two blazing words burning behind it. CLASSIFIED RED.

His right hand trembled as his hopes died.

There was no way he could get through a RED classification. There was a number, however, behind the words, and he quickly typed it in.

TANAKA.

That was it. One word.

He was a dead man, he realized. No one could get to old man Tanaka.

Borax headed for the doors and the only other clue he had.

The Plaza had cleared of hawkers. The mist was thick now, cotton candy rolling through the streets. Here and there outdoor foglamps glowed orange. But above the fog, neon burned the hazy sky with bright blues and reds. Borax walked steadily up Ocean, toward the Micro-Chip Club. Although his gait was even, he seemed to thud more on the left side as he walked.

Damn them, whoever they were.

## In the Misty Days of Steel Men

Far behind, he thought he heard a twittering of computerese, and he started to run.

The Micro-Chip was the bawdiest bar in the Port, with a huge neon sign of a computer chip that screamed in flickering red and blue. Gambling was legal here, and prostitution. Contracts for murder were no doubt signed. Borax wasn't worried about getting in; they let everyone in.

The untended double door squeaked as he went through it.

He looked to the back of the large room.

Past the bar and the food tables.

Jorad sat alone, shuffling his cards.

On the raised stage, a woman danced. She wore layers of gauze, a type of pseudo-silk popular with the ladies of the night in Port City. With each phrase of passing music, she shed a layer of gauze, revealing a bit more of flesh. In the glow from the footlights, her flesh glowed blue. Then purple. Borax felt nothing watching the woman. Jorad must have seen the act a thousand times, Borax thought, but still he watched intently as he shuffled his cards.

"Slow night?" Borax said, as he strode up to the table.

Jorad had nerves; Borax would give him that.

Jorad's eyes moved, as if on a greased track. Sliding sideways toward Borax's voice.

"Come for another game?"

Borax smiled with the right side of his face. "You're the last game I remember," he said.

Jorad tried to look shocked. Then confused.

"Maybe there's something wrong with your memory?"

Borax stood, towering above the dealer. Jorad had slicked back black hair. His cheeks were ruddy, as though he spent much time by the sea, but Borax knew better. Maybe it was the glow of booze.

"My memory is fine. What there is of it."

"Had a little lapse, have we?"

"Not you, surely. You never forget anything, Jorad. A man who makes his living by the cards can't afford to."

Jorad's smile revealed white, even teeth. His eyes seemed to glow from the lights near the stage. Blue. Then purple. Then red. They seemed to flicker past Borax, toward the door.

"You were about to tell me something important, Jorad. Remember?"

Jorad grinned. "That was before. You had a lot of money on the table. We played cards for it. I don't think you have any credit left. Why should I tell you anything?"

Borax sat down opposite Jorad, placing his left arm on the table's surface, the blaster pointed directly at the dealer's chest.

"Because we're playing for something more valuable than credit. Our lives."

Jorad looked from the blaster to Borax's face, then started dealing the cards in a solitary pattern.

"I'm surprised to see you here. Just how much do you remember?"

Borax thought about that, pulling the stray memories together before telling the dealer.

Someone had been killing healthy workers. Their bodies were strewn throughout the alleyways of Port City. Empty shells, stripped of their vital organs. Hearts and lungs and kidneys and livers were missing from the corpses. The people were up in arms as a pattern evolved. Only the blues could kill like that, they said. A revolution was about to start. Borax had traced a good number of the deaths to Jorad's table. And Jorad was frightened that night, about to tell Borax something. . . .

"Tanaka," Jorad said, in answer to his memories, in answer to everything . . . but which opened up so many other problems, so many other questions. Had old man Tanaka ordered the deaths of so many citizens? There was a need for organs, no doubt about that. . . and the Blues. Killing them was too easy. As if they had orders not to kill him.

"Why?" Borax asked. "Why me? Why this?" he shrugged, gesturing with his right hand to his left side.

Jorad glanced up from the card, his eyes running over the metallic glint of Borax's side.

"You are—or were supposed to be—the new Blue."

And with shuddering impact, it all fell into place. The people hated the Blues, were ready to revolt, so Tanaka had taken the next step. He'd created a Blue that was half human but still enslaved, so they could relate to it, but still be afraid of it. And Tanaka and his cronies lived on, stealing from the people, stealing even the organs they needed to live their lives.

Borax felt the information tumbling through his brain, facts and figures computing, raising more questions.

"Why you? What was your involvement?"

Jorad placed a card atop another. "Simple supply and demand. Word was out. I had a need, and Tanaka promised to supply it . . . if I gave him some others . . . and you."

"What do you need?" Borax asked.

"A new liver. Possibly new kidneys. If I delivered you, I was promised I'd move to the front of the waiting list."

Borax stared at his left arm. There was no recharge slot on the blaster. He wouldn't be able to reload with an outside source. He'd have to manufacture his own blasting power.

"Why are you telling me this now?"

"Simple," Jorad said, finishing the game and sweeping the cards together. "Tanaka lied. You don't know how long you've been missing. It's been over a month since you were last here. It takes time to build a new order of being. They knew your record. Your personality. They were going to turn you into the ultimate weapon for them. Obviously they goofed somewhere. You wouldn't be here otherwise. They also lied to me. After you were taken, I reported to the clinic, asking to know when I could expect my organ transplant. They laughed in my face and said they saved organs for valuable citizens, not craven betrayers."

He shuffled the cards again, then looked over Borax's head. "Tanaka said you could be a god. A god at his command. I take it they didn't implant the obedience chip?"

"No," Borax said.

"Good—"

The door exploded inward as the squad of Blues rushed in, their blasters sweeping the room. Patrons fell to the floor screaming, as Jorad hit the floor, taking cover, and Borax spun out of his chair, firing with his left arm. Blues went down, but the others focused their fire on him.

Or did they? None of the bolts hit him, but they did get Jorad. Borax nailed the other Blues, and went to the dealer's side, seeing there was nothing to do.

Jorad's eyes were still open, though. He coughed up blood and a hand inched its way to a pocket, pulling out an info chip. His eyes met those of Borax.

"Be a god of vengeance . . ." and the eyes went dark, the fingers releasing the disc in their death spasm.

## Absolute Magnitude

Borax reached out with his right hand to close the dealer's eyes, taking up the chip.

Screams had died to whimpering in the Micro-Chip, and with his new hearing, he knew another squad of Blues was arriving. He put the chip into one of the blue jeans' pockets and made his way to the club's back door.

Out in the alley all was quiet, and Borax lost no time. He just started running. One thing was sure. He couldn't face Tanaka, not now. He had lost too many memories. He'd lost control of his own body. He had to learn what he could still do, what new things he was capable of, before he could face the man and the company that ran this world.

He needed time to plan his vengeance.

Running through the streets of Port City, a map was called up in his mind, and he ran effortlessly, his breath still even after blocks, then miles. He heard the Blues whenever they approached, and was hidden well before they showed themselves. Once, just before the city limits, he saw a squadron of Blues before a huge stretch limo, whose twin headbeams of orange pierced the night. The limo had a powerful engine and tinted windows. Even his augmented vision couldn't see who was inside.

But he could guess. A man with a white pony tail, sitting upon plush upholstery. A slave chip in his hands, waiting to be implanted.

Borax waited until the limo passed out of sight, and then ran. Ran until he passed the city limits, running off the paved roads onto dirt, and into the brush. Now nothing lay before him but the Outlands.

It was common knowledge that no one had ever survived the

Outlands. They were infested, it was said, with death and disease. But so much that was common knowledge had turned out to be lies. Perhaps this would too.

Either way, he needed time. Time that wouldn't come in Tanaka-controlled Port City. Time to plan, to relearn, to plot.

Borax looked back at the lights of the place he'd grown up in, and then turned his back on them. He would be back. But for now...

He ran.



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Barry B. Longyear is the author of more than a dozen books and a winner of the Hugo, Nebula, and John W. Campbell awards. This is his fourth appearance in *Absolute Magnitude*.

## Kill All the Lawyers — Part III

by Barry B. Longyear

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### SMOKING MAY BE HAZARDOUS TO YOUR HEALTH

I couldn't honestly say that I trusted Fodder right then a whole lot, but I suppose letting him do it was easier than doing it myself. I would've been real stupid to think that we'd never have a dirty cop, so I guess I was stupid. In my gut I felt that the Law and what we had gone through in the crowbars and on Tartaros would make even the idea of an RC climbing on the cob unthinkable. I forget that sharks are always thinking, even if they aren't sharks.

And what to do about it? Who was the victim? What was the payoff? I was too confused to think, and I comforted myself with the fact that at least this case wasn't mine. I found myself a patch of sand on the side of a dune and put my ass on it.

Fodder nodded at the little girl. "Okay, Lauris, tell us what you saw."

"When I went to the RC to get away from my father, Fanta Cerita took me back to him. She argued with him for a little while, then he gave her something and told her to do the right thing."

"Right thing?"

"I guess he meant making me stay with him, because that's what she told me I had to do."

Fodder looked at Fanta Cerita. "Is it all right with you if I decide the matter, or do you want a jury?"

"Jury?" The tall woman laughed. "We are making a production out of nothing at all."

"It's me or a jury, Fanta."

She shrugged, glanced around, and answered. "Fine. You decide. The little girl came to me saying she wants to be rid of her family, maybe like only a couple of hundred million cranky kids a year want. Her father gave me a little present: a pack of cigarettes. Without the gift, my decision would have been the same. A child belongs with her parents."

To underscore her remarks, Fanta lit up a nail and blew out a cloud of white smoke. I never gave any credit to Fodder for having a sense of humor, but he said, "Didn't anyone ever tell you that those things can kill you?"

Then he aimed, fired, and drilled her right through her head, causing the back of her scalp to explode and spatter the spectators. Fanta was stretched out, face up on the sand, her eyes wide open, the nail still burning in her lips. The crowd was stunned as Fodder turned his rifle on Ehadri Nhandi and said, "Justice is everyone getting exactly what they deserve as fast as possible. Fanta Cerita decided against the law for a pack of cigarettes, which obstructs justice. You offered the cigarettes, which also obstructs justice. In the Razai, according to Rule forty-eight, obstructing justice draws the max."

Then Fodder drilled Bhadri Nhandi through his forehead. Amos really liked those head shots. He slung his rifle to the stunned silence of the crowd. I'd never thought of Rule 48. I walked over to him and patted him on his back.

"Fodder, I really think you're getting the hang of it."

The crowd broke up and went back to their shelters. The ex-priest and the little girl stood there together for the longest time. Lauris was crying silently. Her father had raped her, her mother had stood by and refused to believe the evidence of her own eyes, and now her father was dead. Even if your home is a horror show, outside in the dark is still scary. She reached out her hand, took Fodder's arm, and they walked off together.

In my head a thousand things said that Fodder and Lauris were not a good risk. A scared little girl and an old little girl rapist. But it was none of my business. My business was Rule 2 and keeping safe the choice to go wherever you wanted and with whoever you wanted.

An hour later we were mounted and ready to go. Jak Edge was on top of a tall dune getting a fix on the crazies from Cumaris. Bongo was leaving ten of his troops under a mau yard monster named Zua Crown to train the Kvasiri and to man the local heliograph operation. Zarika had cut loose fifty of her mounted rifles to stand guard, and I felt just fine about leaving Amos George in charge of the local law. I had to leave the President behind.

"Maybe I'm wrong, Paxati, but I don't think you could find sand in the desert."

The President stared at the sand in front of his feet. "It's a nightmare. A bloody horrible nightmare." He looked over at Fodder, his body trembling. "You killed one of my closest friends. You blew his head to pieces, in front of everybody!"

I shook my head and answered the Pres. "Bhadri Nhandi committed suicide. So did Fanta Cerita. When you can see that without any help, maybe we can use you."

"The whole thing was all blown out of proportion. It was over nothing! It was only a pack of cigarettes. I've never heard of a modern culture that uses the death penalty to punish the taking of a bribe. Such a little bribe."

"I can think of one," I said. "Snitches and wires back in the crowbars. They take little bribes to roll over on a brother. When we'd catch one, we'd give 'em a slab."

"We aren't convicts! You didn't kill a snitch or some kind of back alley pervers! My people aren't career criminals and mad killers! They're respectable men and women."

I thought about that for a bit. "Maybe that's the problem, Pres. We've had to come a lot farther to appreciate what we have. Maybe that's why we're real jealous about it." I mounted and sat back on my critter and looked around at the President's shipmates,

## Absolute Magnitude

most of them now hiding from the sun beneath their desert sheets. I faced Lomon Paxati.

"Right now you and your people are Razai. While you are, you'll go by the Law. But maybe being Razai is something you might want to put to a vote. The no prisoners law applies to you people too. We don't keep anyone by force."

"Then what about Bhadri Nhandi and Fanta Cerita! What about them?"

"They already made all of their decisions." Nodding toward Zua Crown I said, "If his people decide to bug out of the Razai, be sure to pack up and make it back to the walking column. We don't want to waste all of this good training on people who don't want it."

Jak came down from the dune and signaled to me that he had a fix on the crazies and on the next load from Earth. I looked down at the President and said, "Pres, right now Boss Kegel is riding this way with thirty thousand armed soldiers. All they want from you is your food, your clothes, your ass, your belongings, and your lives. If he's in a good mood he might use some of your women before he kills 'em. Maybe he might just bundle up the survivors and use 'em for slaves. If the Hand gets you instead, forget it. They don't have much use for maus. They just kill them. Personally, I think you got a better deal with the Razai."

Lomon Paxati spat on the sand. At least he'd learned that much from the sharks. "Nicos, you are the ones forcing a war with the Hand. How can we believe you about anything?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Do your own research." I turned my head and looked at Zua. "If this bunch does drop out, make sure our people get back to the main body. You understand the directions?"

She nodded. I looked down at the President. "Like I said, do your own research. Just remember, everything you hate about me and the Razai is there for a reason. You didn't put in the time on the sand and in the crowbars to understand what those reasons are, but if you live long enough, you'll see."

Paxati's face seemed to harden. "I can turn these people against your war, Nicos. It's not their war."

"Slavery makes it everybody's war, whether they fight or not."

I turned and saw Fodder standing on top of a tall dune, Lauris Nhandi standing beside him. I raised my hand and waved. They both waved back. I sat up and gave the high sign to Jak. Beneath the hellishly hot sun, we moved off to make contact with the crazies from Cumaris. Show Biz and Deadeye were as silent as death. I turned on my critter once and looked back. The Pres was gone, off to do what he had to do.

### WHO DO YOU TRUST?

You ride in the sun long enough, that heat and that sidewise rocking motion turning your head into jelly, you numb out or start playing old tapes. Since the bio of Bando Nicos played real down, I numbed, half-listening to Jontine and Deadeye kick around the merits of Nhandi v. Nhandi. Show Biz thought I ought to be shot and Deadeye wasn't altogether certain. As they talked it came out that I had dusted Deadeye's brother, and Show Biz began salivating. She was onto a story. She put the grill on old Deadeye, and before she was done, we'd heard it all about Dave and Jay's childhood back in good old Crapheap, Illinois. They did hits from back in high school and had terribly

interesting experiences slaughtering on contract. Eventually they were imported to Mihvihit where they ran into a black rag and a set of crowbars.

Deadeye hadn't yet gotten to his alleged falling out with his brother when the rider came in from the direction of the main body riding hell for a hairy back. Beneath his sand-painted desert sheet the rider wore Greenville blues. Perspiration had cut trails through the dust on his young face, and he was near out of breath.

"Name's Elijah, Bando. Bloody Sarah sent me to let you know she's hit Kegel."

"Hit him? Already?"

"Ate him alive!" The kid was higher than Pill Phil on a five pound thumper. Zarika and Bongo joined us and we all listened. "About a half hour after sunrise. You wouldn't've heard much. Too far away. Maybe twenty-five keys south. Besides, there were only a couple of shots. Mostly we did cutters."

"What's the count?"

"Four Razai wounded." He grinned widely, displaying a few missing teeth. "Kegel lost eighty dead."

Jontine had her vidcam running and was turned on hotter than sunrise. Elijah gestured with his hand across his throat. "We hid under the sand during the night and ambushed their right flank guard. It was only a small bunch, but we got eighty more rifles and Kegel turned the column right to come looking for us. As soon as Kegel's point guard reached the next ambush, we took most of it out, too. Another sixty or so rifles. No one killed or wounded, and all of the new rifles and ammo are back with the Colonel."

"I'll be damned," I said.

As the others grilled young Elijah, I sat there in absolute wonder. It was working. If Bloody Sarah's raiders could keep Boss Kegel running around chasing shadows and dropping a few rifles here and there, we just might have enough time to rig the odds.

It amazed me. I was such a prepared loser I expected everything to fail at first. I always knew that any victory that Bando Nicos ever saw would be only after everything was lost so bad there wasn't any point. But, here it was. Sarah planned it, she said she was going to do it, and she did it—twice!

When I nodded at Elijah, I must've had the biggest grin on my face since the first fly discovered the south end on the first cow. "This is great, kid. You can come along with us."

"Are you brain burnt, cop? And miss the fun? I gotta get back to the White Slice. There are throats to cut and skulls to explode. Busy, busy, busy. Any messages for her?"

I sat there on my critter, my teeth in my mouth, and damned little in my head. There should be fine words to paste onto such an event, and I couldn't think of a thing. I held out my hands, shrugged, and said, "What took you so long?"

Elijah laughed, turned his critter southeast, and dug in his heels. His high bolted and raced off between the dunes leaving nothing but some dust in the air and the grin on my face. When I turned forward, Jak Edge was looking back at me with the darkest scowl I'd ever seen on a haystack.

"What's your problem, chup?"

He continued scowling at me for a long time. When he finally moved his eyes, he looked down and spat on the sand. "I've got me a lot of friends with Kegel's riders." He glanced up at me. "Me brother Davi usually rides point when Boss Kegel's running the big column."

## Kill All the Lawyers — Part III

"I'm sorry."

He looked off into the distance for a couple of seconds, then gave a tiny shrug of his shoulders. "It's the way things go." Jak gestured with his hand. "The nuts're just up ahead." He faced forward and his critter began walking. I urged mine forward, and I studied our guide's back as I thought about our guide, Jak Edge, former patrol leader for Boss Kegel.

Who do you trust? With the possible exception of the maus from Kvasir and those who were born on Tartaros, all of us had criminal pasts of one kind or another. I'd done some picking and choosing about who would be in the RCs, but when Nkuma started appointing his own, that pretty much went out the window, which was something I'd have to change. I never wanted to see another Fanta Cerita.

But trusting Jak Edge, especially now after learning about his brother, made me very nervous. He had a wife and children down south in Kegel's territory, and the Razai had wiped out three hundred or more men in his command. He had to have had some friends there, as well.

As I looked at his back I could actually feel my trigger finger itching. Better to be safe than sorry. As the cautious man with the machine gun said one Valentine's day, a stitch in time saves nine. Better a dead friend than a live enemy.

The yard smarts would be to take him out, and if I was the boss of a regular gang, that's just what I would have done right then. But I wasn't the boss of a regular gang. I had a boss, which was the vote. And I had another boss, which was the Law. I even had a third boss: Nance Darras. I didn't want to let down her, the Razai, or myself. But, damn, sometimes a slug between the shoulder blades seemed so clean and simple.

"Your head is smoking."

I turned to my right to see Deadeye Jay riding beside me. I shrugged and said, "Yo I can't draw the max for what you think."

"What're you going to do about that load of whacks from Cumaris?"

I hadn't thought about them at all. Talk about being ridden by the dark horse. The whole subject of insanity yellowed me right down to my feathers. And these pistachios weren't just crazy. They were criminally insane, which meant that they'd done some real miff things while they were having their out of brain experiences.

How was the Law going to handle the banana patch? What about doing a simple trial? When I stood in front of the Milvhiations to execute Tani Aduelo, me holding the rifle didn't guarantee that I'd live. But it did guarantee that two or three attackers would splash before I did. It was enough to keep the sane sane. But what about a shipload of popcorns who really don't give a damn about living? What if they all were David Ostrows? I'd have to do Rule 13 with nukes.

I shook my head at Deadeye. "I don't know what to do with them." I glanced out of the corner of my eye at him. "What would you do with them?"

He raised his eyebrows and shrugged. "They'd make great tax collectors."

It wasn't really funny but I laughed like a fool. An excuse to release a world of tension, maybe. Jontine Ru just sat on her critter staring at us. Later she asked him, "I thought you said Nicos killed your brother David."

"He did."

"Why were you up there joking around with his killer?"  
"I thought of a funny. Besides, Dave was a whack."

### THE SHADOW TALKERS

By the time we reached the bunch from Popcorn City it was late afternoon. The sun was just above the horizon giving the sky that brassy yellow color. The yellow heat was cooler than the white heat we'd get for most of the day, but for some reason it seemed hotter. The air was completely still. It didn't seem to have enough oxygen in it. Maybe it was just that we'd all reached the enough-is-enough stage.

The whacks called themselves "Cicis," pronounced "kee-kees," for the Cumaris Institute for the Criminally Insane. There were well over twelve thousand of them. There would've been more but a few hundred had wandered off into the desert by then. Some were chasing the Green Mountain Mirage. Most had internal mirages they followed. The RC in charge of the popcorns was a Milvhiation appointed by Nkuma. He was a howl yard monster named Booker Dry. As soon as we arrived he pulled Deadeye Jay off of his mount and began spreading Deadeye's nose all over his face. Deadeye managed a few swings, once he got his feet beneath him, and soon he was sitting on top of Booker, grinding his face into the grit, trying to bend Booker's arm into a coat hanger.

The former inmates of the Tilton Hilton looked on with reactions ranging from dancing screams to stolid indifference.

I knelt down next to the yard monster's face, where it was buried, and scooped away enough sand to allow me to communicate with him. "Man, what is your problem?"

He grunted, cursed, swore, threatened, and pretty much gibbered out of his gourd. The gist of his remarks centered around an old crowbar beef that Booker had sworn to avenge, in that the next time he saw Jay Ostrow, he would kill him.

"Kill him!" shouted one of the popcorns behind me, and soon I could hear the phrase being repeated over and over again through the gathering crowd. "Kill him! Kill him! Kill him!"

Jesus, it made my skin crawl. I got to my feet and fired my rifle in the air. Bringing down my piece to the ready as the crowd shut up, I poked Booker Dry with my toe.

"Man, you have got yourself an attitude. Right now Deadeye could drill you right through your knuckle head, and it would be legal. Didn't you read the Law?"

"Fuck the law."

The sentiment was picked up by the inmates, and soon every one was saying "Fuck the law! Fuck the law! Fuck the law!"

I raised my weapon again and they quieted down. Looking at Booker, I said "I don't guess it's going to be any big surprise to you that you're fired."

"Don't fire him, Chief," said Deadeye. "I won't bring any charges. Seeing Booker Dry as a Razai Cop has made the whole trip worthwhile."

The big haystack pushed away from Booker and sprang to his feet. Spitting sand, Booker pushed himself up and rubbed his left arm as he glared at Jay Ostrow through grit-filled eyes.

"We want Booker for our RC" said a pleasant voice with what sounded like a very genteel Southern accent. I looked and there was a skinny man in his late forties with pale skin and thinning gray hair. He was smiling.

"Did you say that?" I asked.

## Absolute Magnitude

"Yes, I did." He continued to smile.

"What's your name?"

"James Britton," he said as he grinned, "friend of the court."

"Why do you want him for your RC?"

"Why?" The man rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I guess it's because he's a crazy son of a bitch. Just like us." A wave of very scary laughter came from the surrounding crowd. When the laughter eased, I stood squarely in front of Booker Dry and looked him in the eyes.

"Speak to me, asshole."

"What about, greaseball?"

With my finger on the trigger, I stuck the muzzle of my rifle in Booker's mouth. "Let me introduce myself. I'm Bando Nicos, Chief of the RCs."

The garble of words around my rifle's muzzle sounded like "Pleased to meet you."

"Have you read the Law?"

He nodded vigorously.

"Then can you tell me what Rule 13 is?"

His eyes went wide and he shook his head.

"Rule 13 says that a threat is a crime, and it carries as a penalty the performance of the threat upon the threatener. I could squeeze my trigger right now and put a picture window in the back of your skull for that alone. But, do you know what Rule 33 says?"

Again he shook his head.

"Rule 33 says that the penalty for attempted murder is the max. I could blow your head off for that and go home and get a good night's sleep. There's more, though. You want to know what that is?"

He shrugged as best he could.

"We don't like crooked RCs. We just smoked an RC out of her sock for taking a pack of nails for a bribe. Just imagine what we'd do to an RC who tried to murder another RC. But then that's all up to Deadeye. He's the one you jumped."

Deadeye Jay Ostrow stood next to Booker Dry, put his right arm around his shoulders, and removed my gun muzzle from the man's mouth with his left hand. "Hey, Book. You're slobbering all over the man's piece." Deadeye looked at me, still grinning. "Booker was only grabbing around, weren't you, Booker?"

Booker nodded with considerable enthusiasm. I slung my rifle and looked around at the crowd. Disappointment was on many of the faces. "That's it," I said. Many of them began wandering off, since the fun was over and it was time to tear down the camp and get back on the trail. I instructed Zarika to post the guard, told Bongo to see what he could do about training, and tried to figure out what to do about an RC for the popcorns. There would be an hour or so for chow before we struck out to make contact with the next lead from Earth.

As I was rooting through my sack for something to eat, the skinny Cici with the gray hair walked up and offered me one of his ration bars. I took it and tried it. It was made from dried fruits and was delicious. "Thanks."

The man was still smiling when he said, "Bando Nicos, you are just like us, too. One crazy son of a bitch."

The evening air was shattered by a hideous scream followed by laughter and more screaming. I dropped the ration bar, held my rifle at the ready, and ran in the direction of the noise. I ran up and over a dune, and when I reached the top I saw a small crowd down at the bottom. Some of those in the crowd were screaming, some

were moaning. Cici's were racing to join the crowd and see what was to be seen.

In the center of the crowd was a woman with a knife. She was kneeling over the bloodied remains of what appeared to be another woman. The woman with the knife was cutting off pieces of the dead woman's thigh and was eating them as quickly as she could. Her chin and the front of her desert sheet glistened with blood. Show Biz was off to the side getting everything down in livid color. I closed my eyes and thought as I worked to hold down my chow, here we go again. This time, however, the insanity defense looked pretty good.

### THE DEAD LADY V. YVONNE

The lady with the human blood all over her chin was named Yvonne. There were plenty of witnesses, and they all said the same thing. Yvonne had walked up to the woman, lifted the knife, and stuck the blade through her throat, then again through her heart and a few other places. She then knelt down next to her and began snacking. No one knew the victim's name, and the only thing the other patients had ever heard the perp called was Yvonne.

As the sun went below the horizon and the desert air turned to ice, Booker referred to the victim once as "the lunch." I smacked him upside his head with the stock of my rifle. Later I apologized to him. After all, I had just broken the law and didn't want Booker Dry doing payback on my head bone. It was important to my own sanity not to let my rages get the better of me. The whole thing was getting just too damned tense.

We couldn't hold prisoners, so we weren't able to pull Yvonne from the dead lady. She simply knelt there and kept slicing and eating. I instructed two of Zarika's soldiers to remove the body and bury it. Once it had been removed, Yvonne's eyes glazed over, the knife in her hand dropped to the sand, and she became absolutely motionless. I couldn't even tell if she was breathing.

I squatted in front of her, picked up the knife, and looked into her eyes. It was like looking at the eyes of dead fish in the market.

"Yvonne?" I said.

The Cici's surrounding us took up the call with repeated whispers of "Yvonne? Yvonne? Yvonne?" It made every filthy square centimeter of my skin ripple with loathing. Popcorns, I thought. What am I supposed to do with the goddamned shadow talkers?

I shook her shoulders, and again repeated, "Yvonne?"

Again the popcorns took up the call. "Yvonne? Yvonne? Yvonne?" There was an unsettling screech of laughter, but the scariest whacks just stood there and stared at my eyes. I couldn't even imagine what their eyes were seeing. What those whacks might do because of what they were seeing crowded my speculations, turning them into nightmares.

I looked around at the faces and asked, "Who knows her?"

"No one. No one knows her," answered a voice.

"No one," whispered a few voices. "No one. No one knows."

The original speaker was a frail old woman who was just about lost inside her parka. There was that chalky smell in the air, which meant that it was getting bitter cold. I unbundled my own shirt and parka and began putting them on beneath my desert sheet. As I did so, I asked the old woman, "What's your name?"

## Kill All the Lawyers — Part III

"Marie. Marie Vonat." The old woman looked down at Yvonne. "For as long as any of us were there, Yvonne was there. She was always there. She never moved or talked or even fed herself." Marie nodded and said with real pride in her voice, "I can feed myself."

I looked up at Marie as an incredible weariness came over me. "From what I see, so can Yvonne." More shrill cackles from the popcorn gallery. Here was Bando Nicos doing standup in Gibber City.

I stood up and looked down at Yvonne. I couldn't even figure out how old she was. Her hair was long, stringy and gray, but her skin was baby smooth. She was incredibly thin making her look like a skeleton. And there was that blood all over her chin and hands.

You didn't need to be coking up with Siggy Freud to see that Yvonne's head was in another dimension. She was a big time whack, and that would have given her a ticket out of the gas can back on Earth. It let her off the hook for murder almost anywhere that I had ever heard about. But if insanity is your defense, and you get off, they're supposed to stick you somewhere so you can't hurt anybody else. And the Razai couldn't hold prisoners. And what about the dead lady's payback?

I walked to the edge of the circle and squatted on the sand, my forearms resting on my knees. The Razai couldn't hold prisoners, so there was no place we could stick her. What to do about the killer popcorns? What do you do in the Razai about a genuine not guilty by reason of insanity plea?

A small cloud moved in the night sky suddenly revealing the tiny satellite we called Blue Moon. I'll be damned if one of those whacks didn't begin howling and growling like a werewolf in full frenzy. Then the nuttall laughed and said he was only kidding. Popcorn humor.

I pulled out my copy of the *Law* and leafed through the few pages. They were getting pretty ratty. It was too dark to read, so I pulled a fire cube and struck it off the barrel of my piece. I touched my greenstick to it, picked up the cube, and used the light from it to read. I began reading the entire *Law* from What's Mine Is Mine to the Law of Silence.

*Justice is everybody getting exactly what they deserve as fast as possible.* But what did the dead lady deserve? What did Yvonne deserve? Who knew what hell had hammered Yvonne's head into this strange dimension she inhabited?

We did have one provision that covered old hells. Rule 11. *Any crimes or issues that originated before the landing are done past. Any kind of retribution based on such crimes is a new crime.*

And Rule 15. *The penalty for all crimes is payback, and payback for taking a life is everything plus a little.* Rule 19 held that, in a trial, not entering a plea is a plea of guilty, and Yvonne wasn't going to be entering any plea. It wasn't even possible to get her to understand the charges. If she had that much brain power left, she probably wouldn't have been locked up in the first place. She didn't understand anything like guilty or not guilty. If she understood anything at all it was kill, eat, and drop into neutral.

I looked up from my copy and saw that the crowd was silently squatting or sitting on the cold sand, Yvonne still motionless in the center. Deadeye was seated cross legged on the sand next to Booker Dry. Both of them were staring at me. Show Biz was getting pictures, and Zarika was keeping an eye on the guards she'd posted to cover the whacks.

A man came from the far side of the circle, unbundled Yvonne's parka, and put it over her shoulders. It seemed to make no difference to Yvonne. Hot and cold appeared to be too complicated to figure out. But, hell, even a vegetable tries to live. On the vids I'd seen the experiments on the nature shows. Plants have feelings. But you could've fed Yvonne feet first through a meat grinder and she wouldn't have noticed.

The Eyes of the Spider were in the sky, and I wondered if Alna was watching them. I knew Alna had feelings. Whatever she felt was advertised on her face twenty-seven hours a day. But it'd been pointed out to me several times before that I don't let my emotions show. The therapist at Lancaster just used to beg me, "Show your feelings, Bando. Show your feelings."

I liked the guy, so I'd tried, but to show a feeling you have to feel it first, and I had been way beyond feeling anything besides rage and depression for years. Maybe Yvonne wasn't so crazy; maybe I was.

I looked back at the *Law*. Rule 41 made the investigator responsible for doing payback for dead victims. Rule 42 made it so that when Rule 41 applied, the investigator would always choose the max.

I leaned forward and moistened my lips as I read Rule 51. *... suffering the symptoms of a compulsive disease [is] no defense if the perp could have sought help prior to the commission of the crime.*

So for addicts, that meant that addiction, being thumped on a chemical, was no defense. But could Yvonne have asked for help before she cut up the dead lady? Maybe she did ask and no one remembered. Maybe she did ask and no one could hear her. Maybe she just couldn't ask anybody for anything. Maybe her mind was on such a level that she had more in common with a great white shark than with a dune shark. Real sharks never ask for help.

In which case, I asked myself, what in the hell was she doing with a knife? I lifted up the knife and held it in the light of the fire cube. It was no homemade cutter with a taped handle and an edge sharpened on the concrete of a cell floor. In between the sticky gods of drying blood, the handle glittered with real silver. It was a folding knife with a five-inch single edged blade. I rubbed and flaked the dried blood off the handle. Engraved on one side of the handle were the words "Chapel Hill." A sour taste flooded my mouth as I looked at the other side. On the opposite handle was engraved a little shield in the center of which was a tiny set of scales. The mark of the cockroach.

I pushed myself to my feet and walked until I stood next to Yvonne. I held the knife out in front of her face, and instantly her hands made a grab for it. I yanked it out of her reach just in time. As soon as the knife was out of sight, she went back to looking like a statue. She wasn't a woman; she was an automaton; a killing machine.

I walked completely around her, looking at the edge of the crowd as I went, certain that the face I wanted to find would be one of the closest. I spoke to the crowd as I walked. "You've all heard the *Law*," I began. "Every now and then something comes up that the *Law* doesn't cover, and this is one of those times." There were some giggles and a harsh titter. My eyes searched for the titter, and they found the face I was looking for.

"I'm supposed to begin a trial by asking the perp—the defendant—if he wants a jury or if it's okay that the investigator

## Absolute Magnitude

judges the case. As you can all see, I can't really ask the perp in this case, so we're going to make a new rule. Rule 58. In cases where the investigator can't get a response out of the perp for any reason, a majority vote of the immediate spectators can substitute. So I put it to you: is it okay if I take care of this, or should the perp get a jury?"

It was almost unanimous that I should take care of it. That covered my ass for what I had to do next, because the last thing I needed right then was trying to put together a couple of juries out of a bucket of popcorns. When the talking quieted down, I walked until I stood face-to-face with James Britton, friend of the court.

"I've been looking for you," I said.

"Here I am," he answered. "You're still a crazy son of a bitch," he said as he grinned.

"James Britton, I'd bet almost anything that at one time you were an attorney."

Britton's eyebrows went up. "Very astute. I'm astonished at how perceptive you are. I didn't give you near enough credit."

"Tell me, lawyer, what do you think of *The Law of the Razai*?"

His eyebrows went up as his lips locked into terminal smirk. "You want my professional opinion?"

I stood close enough that I could smell his breath. That meant that he could smell mine, too, and I had been on the sand a week longer than him. I folded my arms. "Sure. You think maybe it needs a little work?"

He smiled as he practically batted his eyelids and answered with his honeysuckle accent. "Well, there are some amaz'n loopholes in it, aren't there?"

I nodded and asked, "Is that why you did it?"

"Did it?" His smile slowly evaporated. "Did what?"

"Is that why you gave her your knife?" I held it up in front of his face.

"What makes you think that's my knife?"

"You're a cockroach. This knife belongs to a cockroach."

"That could be anyone's knife." He held up his hands, palms outward. "Look, this is very improper—"

"A pretty knife like this. Some of your buddies must've seen it on you before." I raised my voice as I held the knife above my head. "It's a silver knife with a five inch blade. It's got the name of some mush mouth down south city called Chapel Hill on one side of the handle and a little crest with a set of scales in the middle on the other side." I poked his chest with the handle. "What was it, cockroach, a convention at the local roach motel?"

He shook his head. "You're wrong. You've got nothin'."

I held up the knife. "Anybody!" I turned around. "Has anybody seen James Britton with this knife?"

"I did," called one voice. "He always had it with him even though he wasn't allowed. We weren't allowed any knives."

"He had his daughter sneak it to him because he was afraid of us," said another. There were giggles and screeches. I could relate; not to the giggles and screeches, but to Jimmy Britton wanting a cutter. I was afraid of them, too.

"I saw him," said another. "He always had that knife."

"That's his knife," a third accused.

I nodded as I stared into those gray eyes. "Just wanted to see what would happen, cockroach? A little test of the system? Just to show how smart you are? Just to show how ignorant we are? Or was it just because we failed to consult your arrogant ass before we put together our pitiful effort?"

"What are you goin' to do?" asked the whack cockroach. "What ever are you goin' to do? Givin' a knife to someone isn't a crime, even accordin' to the Law."

"It doesn't say," I answered. "But causing someone's death? It has a whole bunch to say about that. If one guy pays the money to blow away Oswald and another one pulls the trigger, who's guilty of killing Oswald? They both are, cockroach."

That smirk was bolted onto his lips. "I'm going to want a jury, you know."

His eyes twinkled, and as the corners of his mouth pulled back into a tiny grin, I said, "We already voted that Bando Nicos is settling this hash." I pushed the blade of the knife through his ribs and into his heart with such force I snapped off the blade.

"The jury's already in on you, cockroach."

There was that frown on his face. Kind of confused, like somehow I had broken the rules. He didn't make much noise, just a lot of gasps before he stopped twitching. Maybe it was wishful thinking, but I could swear his lips were trying to form the word "objection." I kind of wished he'd feed me the "That's not fair" line so I could come back like Big Brown with "No, that's a knife," but he just went still.

I went back to Yvonne and stood next to her as I spoke to the crowd about another new rule which immediately became known as the Mad Dog Rule.

"*The Law of the Razai* is for people. It's for settling beefs between people. Now if you've got problems with a rock, a windstorm, or a mad dog, the *Law* only applies to you. It doesn't protect the rock, the tree, or the mad dog. The *Law* only applies to people, and a people is someone who can choose not to kill." I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. This was not something I wanted to do. "If all you are is a killing machine, and you can't choose not to kill, then you aren't a person."

I pointed around the circle at all of them. "The way I understand it is that you are all killers that can't help yourselves. That's what I just called a mad dog. What happened before you landed is done past. But you kill here, you better do it according to the *Law*. If you're in a firefight with the Hard or Kegel, if you're defending yourself, if you're executing a perp in a trial according to the *Law*, go for it. But if all you have is an overwhelming need to kill, the kind of need you can't do anything about," I turned and fired my rifle at Yvonne, striking her in the chest. Still seated on her calves, she flopped backward and faced up to the belly of the Spider, her legs still folded beneath her. "Then there's no difference between you and a mad dog."

The crowd stood silently for a long time. There was a cry here, a whimper there, a laugh or two. Finally it started breaking up and they moved off to join the column heading east. Booker Dry was one of the ones who lingered behind. I had left him in some kind of doubt about his occupational status.

"Booker, about being an RC—"

"Forget it, Nicos. You don't have to fire me. I quit. I wouldn't do what you do for a free ride back home." He turned and headed east to join the column. Not being good enough for the likes of Booker Dry was a strange place to be. I didn't know whether I had been moved up or down in status.

In moments there was only myself, Yvonne, and the dead cockroach with the strange sense of humor. Killing the cockroach was almost fun. I sort of wanted to wake him up and kill him all over again. Yvonne was something else. She would make a very

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interesting addition to my ghost collection. When she haunted my nightmares, I wondered if she would finally speak.

I turned around, slogged through the sand over the dune, and came back to my critter and the rest of the party. By the light of a fire cube I looked through my copy of the *Law* until I found a sheet that was only two thirds full. I copied down the two new rules twice. Once I'd ripped off one copy of the new rules I handed it to Zarika. "Have one of your people run this back to Stays with the details."

She folded the scrap of paper as her eyes studied me. "What if Stays doesn't like the new rules? Isn't he the clearinghouse for new rules? Didn't you appoint him the clearinghouse for new rules? Weren't you supposed to clear new rules with him before you started killing people with them?"

"Is getting that scrap of paper back to Stays too much for you to handle?"

"I can handle it." She cocked her head toward one of the soldiers, a haystack from Lewisburg named Boats. Zarika gave him the paper and nodded toward the east. Boats took the paper, tucked it in his belt, mounted his critter, gave me a power salute, and was gone.

Looking back at me, Zarika said, "I was just asking a few questions that needed to be asked. Maybe I was just being a Devil's advocate."

As I pulled myself up on my critter I said to her, "Reach into your shorts, yank some short and curly, and wake up. If you want to pound pork with the cockroaches, grab a black rag. Go be a lawyer. Asshole questions is all they're good for. What I need are answers, not more asshole questions."

Everyone was quiet, and the silence almost shouted that killing Yvonne was wrong. It wasn't her fault. She was insane. Sick. What did it matter that our guts were tuned to different worlds while reality was taking place on Tartaros. We probably didn't even need the new rules. Max payback for a life taken was already in the *Law*. All the new rules did was clear up a for instance. You take a life not according to the rules, bang, you pay a life. Period.

Jontine Ru was mounted and her face was devoid of expression as she held up her little vid camera. "I've got it on tape, Nicos. All of it."

"And?"

She aimed it at me and I began recording, her voice like St. Peter at the gate totaling up final accounts. "Is there anything you want to say for the record? Worlds want to know?"

"Yeah." I turned on my critter's back and faced her. "Take your little camera and stick it up your tight little ass." I shot her and all those worlds a middle fingered salute, dug my heels into my critter's sides, and moved off.

Sure, Yvonne was sick. Something to think about, though: There's sick and there's sick. When your kind of sick starts killing others, then you lose your ticket on the ride. You become not a person. I didn't expect the popcorns to like it. I didn't expect Jontine Ru or anyone else to like it. I didn't even like it myself. I just didn't have a better answer.

An hour after leaving the Cici column behind, I glanced up and stared the Spider in the eyes. I needed help in shutting up the committee that was camped out and shouting between my ears. I didn't care that the Spider was a big cloud of dust in space. I needed one of those powers of the universe I used to hear about at the CSA meetings. I asked the Spider for just a little peace of mind.

I closed my eyes, gave the critter its head, and tried to catch a doze or two before we reached the new bunch from Earth. I needed sleep. Tomorrow's light would signal the first day of my third week on Tartaros. My third week on infinity hold.

### A SHOT IN THE DARK

Over the next four days we made contact with five more ship loads of sharks that Nkuma had steered in our direction. There was the new load from Earth, a consignment from a planet called Adramelech, two loads from Nyakate which were made up of nothing but chops, and a load of mostly India Indians from Rhitan. One accent or another, they all spoke Crowbar.

Each group had its Nkuma-appointed RCs, a few hardheads, and a case or two that needed immediate attention. Nkuma seemed to have two great gifts. The first was tracking down landing spots and selling the new convict-exiles on the Razai and the *Law*, even when language was a big problem. The second gift was appointing absolute disasters as RCs. By the time we caught up with him we had executed three dirty cops and had found it necessary to untangle any number of dangerous situations Nkuma's burn RCs had created or made worse.

With me watching I had Deadeye do a little on the job training on trial investigations and executions. When it came time to blow away a perp, Deadeye would pull the trigger, sling his piece, and be done with it. He still wasn't emotionally involved. It made him really good. There were the rules, here was a situation, add them together and subtract the perp. He was like a machine. I envied him.

There was another new rule I had to make, though. Rule 60, said that only the chief RC, or whoever he says, can appoint new RCs. The rule made it okay for any RC to finger someone as a deputy, but deputies couldn't conduct trials or do anything else except follow the orders of a regular RC. When Nkuma took off again to harvest the desert crop he had three Bando-trained RCs with him. When Deadeye, Jontine, and me made it back to the main column, I made arrangements with Stays to send more RCs to Nkuma as they were trained. Because Nance and her bunch'd been left behind, all of this time I'd been without Alna. We'd send messages back and forth with the couriers when we could, but neither of us were big letter writers. Instead we looked at the Eyes and talked to each other. Sometimes it was like speaking directly to her and hearing her answer. Most times it was like hollering into an empty box.

Bloody Sarah had whacked Kegel's gang three more times with hit-and-run raids and had managed to force Kegel to split his double column. This left a force of around fifteen thousand mounted rifles and most of the supply column chasing east after the signal flares while the remaining fifteen thousand turned south after Sarah. I would've preferred to been riding with Sarah, or even back in the column thinning perps, but my job was to be there, be strong, and trust my people.

It was late evening and I was beginning to feel that Bando Nicos being in charge of the Razai wasn't the tremendous disaster I'd thought it was going to be. Messengers had brought the word that the Kegeleros were off chasing each other around the dunes, Mercy Jane and the Wolf had finished their carving on Nance, and Nance's sled was back on the trail.



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Deadeye was training new RCs. Stays, the Magic Mountain, and me had just finished a CSA meeting and were working on our rations. All my little ducks were all lined up in a row, a condition that had more than once announced the end of a good time for Bando Nicos. At the meeting I'd talked about how things seemed to be going too well for me. I told them that the success was making me real nervous. It was like the happy feeling you had just before the cops dropped the sting in your lap.

They told me to turn off my projector and work it one day at a time. All of the worrying is nothing but trying to control the future. From experience we all knew that if the future was something that could be controlled none of us would've been on Tartaros.

We'd just finished our rations, the Eyes high in the sky, when Cap Brady and Margo Hoyt returned from an old business hunting trip. They had been chasing down and executing the Hand's fifty rape perps who had made a run for it.

After the greetings Cap unfolded his lanky frame on the other side of the fire cube and stretched out on the sand facing me. Margo sat to my right, leaned her elbows on her knees and rested her chin on her clasped hands. Neither one of them looked like they gave a crap about anything.

When I'd last seen her, Margo had been hot vengeance on a rocket, rubbing Stays's nose in the fourth law which made it so that the Razai can't stand by and do nothing if the victim of a crime asks for help. Margo was one of the no crime, nothin' but time, pure ones who'd been born on Tartaros. She'd been a Hand slave and had been more than filled with righteous fury when she went after the rape perps. Stays did a good job teaming her up with Cap. Although he was a rageaholic like me, he was also a former police captain and an old hand at channeling the anger of cops so that it would land on the perps instead of other cops or civvies.

Margo kept staring at the fire cube like if she could fill her mind with the fire, it would put out the nightmare of thoughts nesting behind her eyes. I looked at Cap, and he was also looking at Margo. He dropped his gaze, then looked up at me.

Stays and Marietta orb'd each other for a bit, then Stays looked at Cap and asked, "So, how'd it go?"

The left side of Cap's mouth curled down, he nodded, and looked at me. "They're all dead. Four were jumped by scavengers, eleven died from exposure, and Margo, Herb, and I did the remaining thirty-five."

"Where's Herb?" I asked.

"Looking for Marantha if he's got any sense left." Cap glanced at Margo then turned his gaze toward the fire cube. "Find something else for us to do, Bando. Something besides hunting and killing."

I looked at Margo and her large blue eyes were looking at me. They were filled with tears. "What's happening, Margo? A few days ago you had a razor in your teeth and were after every swingin' dick in the Hand. Is that off?"

"No." She slowly shook her head. "Not as far as I'm concerned, it's not. We've got to end that horror. It's just that—" She covered her face with her hands. "They're people. They're humans. When we started out they were just rapists and murderers: monsters. Especially the two who raped me. But they aren't monsters. One of them was dying of thirst and begging for his mother when I drilled him. One of the men who raped me, when he saw it was me who had come after him, looked relieved. He

really believed he was off the hook. He believed that because what I called rape he really thought was love. He simply couldn't understand why I shot him."

She was silent for a moment as she dried her face with the heel of her hand. "You're right," she said, "I was filled with hate and anger before we started out." She looked up at me. "I'm empty."

A bit of a wind was up, and the icy chill of the desert night made us all wrap a little tighter, move a little closer. I said to Margo, "I've got a ghost collection, too."

Cap pushed himself to a sitting position and said, "Margo doesn't want to add to hers."

I rubbed my chin and thought for a bit. When I wanted out, Nance had told me to either do the job or hit the dunes. These two were like Alna. They just didn't want to kill any more. That was why Bloody Sarah had made Alna a nurse. Besides, thanks to the popcorns from Cumaris, we now had plenty of folks in the Razai who weren't bothered by some killing. I would have to think some more on that.

I didn't feel real cozy about making a compulsive killer one of the hunters any more than I'd trust an active alcoholic to be any good as a wine taster. It was just like with my addiction, rage. It isn't that there aren't any reasons that are good enough to make you angry. It's the difficulty in stopping it once it gets started. Well, there wasn't any reason why Cap and Margo had to do all of the exterminating.

"I might have a couple of other slots open. Margo, you were born here and lived with the Hand for quite a while. I want you to stick by headquarters and advise me and Nance about who's who and what's what. Okay?"

She took a deep breath and let it out as she closed her eyes and nodded. "Okay."

I looked at Cap. "I have something for you, too."

He raised his eyebrows and said, "I turned down being your number two cop once before."

"No problem." I pointed at Stays with my thumb. "Right now I got Watson doing that and I wouldn't trade him for a pack of peanuts. I've got something else in mind for you."

"Like what?"

I tossed the remainder of my awful bar into my sack. Tying the sack closed, I pushed it aside. "I'm not sure what to call it. An understudy, maybe."

"An understudy to whom?"

I smiled. "Me."

He held up his hands. "Bando, I already said I can't boss the RCs—"

"I'm not talking about the RCs. I'm talking about bossing the Razai. Nance fingered me for number two. Right now we need a number two for number two."

His mouth hung open in such a comical manner that it made me chuckle. "That's right, Cap. I need a number three."

"No." He shook his head and said with more force, "No. That would be a mistake."

"How so?"

He held out his hands, "Bando, I killed a man."

"Great jammed Jesus, Cap! By now, who in the hell hasn't?"

"I mean on Earth."

I shrugged. "I killed a man on Earth, too."

"I was a police captain!"

"I was unemployed."

## Kill All the Lawyers — Part III

There was still a lot of pain in that mental wound of his. It was time to begin washing it out. "You were a police captain. So that means you have a lot of experience commanding people and all of that administration stuff that I don't even know what I don't know."

Cap shook his head then looked at me. "To tell you the truth I'd rather be out on the dunes whacking perps."

"You are a hard man to please, Cap."

He wrapped his arms around his knees, stared into the glow of the fire cube and pressed his lips shut tight. Margo got up from her place and kneeled next to Cap, her right hand rubbing the back of his neck.

I looked at Stays. "What do you think?"

"I think it's a brilliant pick."

We both looked at Marietta and I asked, "What do you think?"

"You know what I think?" Her huge face remained impassive as she stared at me and answered in an even voice, "I think the capital of Tonga is Nukualofa. That's what I think."

It was her special way of letting me know that she knew what my responsibilities were even if I didn't. Stays laughed, and then Marietta laughed. Margo was smiling but Cap was shaking his head. I began to see that there was a lot of Fodder in ol' Cap Brady. Man, he was beating himself up so bad it's a wonder he was still alive. Fodder needed to forgive himself, which is a lot different than letting himself off the hook. He needed to accept that nothing, including beating himself up, could change the past. Cap needed the same thing. I didn't know exactly how to say it, and I didn't have time to write a sermon, so I let my mouth do the talking and hoped for the best.

"Back on Earth, Cap, when you thinned Diaper Lou Imagia, you really crossed your threads. You broke your oath, you dropped all your responsibilities, you murdered a man, and maybe to you it isn't important that the law never was going to get Diaper Lou. Maybe it doesn't make any difference that that child molesting, kiddie stufin', sack of bat shit deserved killing more than any form of life that ever existed on Earth. You were a cop and you did a murder."

"That's right."

"Unh huh. And now you ain't worthy to chief the RCs and you ain't good enough to boss the Razai."

"That's right."

I held out my hands. "Who is worthy, Cap? It sure as hell isn't Nance. The people she murdered she tortured to death. It isn't me. I've got blood all over my hands. We've both thinned a few. Everybody on the Forever Sand's killed somebody or did something else."

"But they weren't police officers!"

"Some of them were." I leaned forward and poked at my fire cube with my greenstick. "Cap, we got a lot happening right now. If we're going to come out of this mess on top of Kegel and the Hand, everybody's shoulders have to be in there." I pointed my greenstick at Cap. "Here's what I think, haystack. You still feel bad about what you did, but you're using it."

"Using it?"

I nodded. "Suckin' it dry for everything it's worth. One big excuse to shuck off responsibility. I know you're no coward, Cap. That's why I figure you're only doing what you're doing because you can't see it." I stood up and kicked sand over the fire cube. The Eyes of the Spider were sharp in the night sky, Blue Moon

was on the rise. I pulled my parka hood up and put on my gloves as I silently asked Alna how I was doing. She figured I was doing okay.

I looked down at Cap Brady. "The job's yours, Cap. As Nance once told me, either do it or hit the dunes." I started to bend over to pick up my sack and a light exploded in my face, the force of it spinning my head around so far that I was certain it had twisted completely off my body. There were a million blue moons in the sky.

I could see myself hurtling down a bottomless black well. There was no sound. It was like no one had noticed I'd been hit.

I had the smell and taste of iron in my mouth and I knew that I had been shot. There were three things in my mind right then. The first thing was that I really didn't have the time to waste to be shot right then. There were just too damned many things I needed to do.

The second thing was Deadeye Jay. I was the one who snuffed his brother. Had he finally gotten in touch with his feelings? What about all of little Tani's friends? What about the whacks from Cumaris? Maybe the bird who threw the lead at me was the same bastard who had drilled Nance Damas.

The third thing in my mind was Alna. I concentrated on trying to remember every single detail of her face and body. I was distressed at how little I could recall. My last thought was a prayer that Stays, Marietta, Cap, and Margo weren't just sitting around patting my hand and dribbling tears into the grit, but instead were burning across the sand looking for a smoking piece and the finger who had fired it.

I had mixed feelings about surviving being shot. I dearly wanted to deal payback to the perp who put the hole in my head. However, I also knew that if I lived long enough to wake up, my head was going to hurt like stripes on a squeal.

### AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

I'd heard about those out of body experiences before, but I always figured those who had them had also been chewing buttons or otherwise crisping their lobes. I didn't believe in them, but I believed that the people talking about them believed in them.

There was my first cellmate at Greenville, Black Max Campbell. Black Max was opened up from his crotch to his breastbone by the chili pepper from Hell, Chulo Domingo. Max was in the prison hospital for almost ten weeks, and when he got out he was a different man. That night he told me that his heart had stopped and he had seen a dark tunnel filled with locked doors. He was in that tunnel for a thousand years trying to open the doors. He'd try one, then the next, and the next, screaming and crying the whole time. Then from the end of the tunnel, he saw a blinding yellow light. He moved toward the light, and the closer he came toward it, the more filled he was with peace. The agonies, evils, and angers that constantly plagued his mind were being replaced by serenity, joy, love.

"It was God, Bando," he had said to me in the dark. "I swear it was God."

Then he told me about moving toward the light and being caught up in a whirlwind of warm air that urged him toward the light until he was given a choice to enter the light or go back to the Crotch. He said he chose life. I remember telling him that he was

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bent. Given a choice between life in the Crotch and eternity in Heaven, who would pick the Crotch?

"You can't see it, Bando," he said. "You can't see what a gift life is." Then he told me about coming back and watching the doctors operate on him.

He was never the same after that. A year later Brooks and Norberg tried their big breakout. They died along with about fifty-one other sharks that got whacked or wounded. In the middle of it maybe forty slugs stitched across our cell. I caught one in each leg, but Max caught his through the lungs and his pump. He died with his eyes aimed at me, but he was seeing something else. He was smiling.

I believed Black Max believed, but for me to believe, I had to try and accept that there was more to the universe than some humans stepping on other humans just so they could get their noses a little higher than the ever advancing tide of shit. There just wasn't any way I could believe that.

Anyway, I'd think of what Black Max'd told me every time I'd read about similar experiences, or see something about it on the vids. I kind of hoped that Max had found his heaven, but I didn't count on it.

The slug that put me down on the Forever Sand brought all of those memories back to me as I found myself walking my own tunnel. Instead of doors, the sides of my tunnel were gleaming black, like they were made out of polished obsidian. I ran down the tunnel, straining my eyes, looking for the light that Black Max had promised would be there for me. I could feel the tears choke my throat and fill my eyes as I screamed that it was all a lie, that there was no light, no peace.

Then, in the far distance, I saw a bluish light. Dim at first, it grew and grew in brilliance until it filled every corner of my heart, my mind, my soul. There were faces. All of my ghosts were there. They no longer accused me. I no longer feared them.

The dealer I killed, the bastard who had tossed my kid sister away like a used tissue, he was there. I didn't hate him and he didn't blame me. In the glow of that light every face there understood me, and I understood them and everything else. Yvonne was there, and no longer was she a grey-haired old cannibal with a blank stare. Her face was young, her eyes were full of life, and she loved me. I stood upon a place where, for ever and ever, I could swim in the stream of this great river of love.

All of a sudden I found myself suspended in darkness. There was a cluster of stars far away, but above me were the Eyes of the Spider. Below me appeared tiny orange points of light, and soon I was swooping above the columns, searching desperately for something.

There was the interior of one of the sand sleds. I could see Mercy Jane and the Wolf bending over Bando Nicos. It looked like the Wolf had my own ice pick stuck in my right temple almost all of the way to the handle. I watched as the long thin spike went deeper within my brain.

Alna was there. And Nance. Nance was up, sitting on one of the built in couches, leaning against the wall, holding my left hand, her lips moving. Alna kneeling next to my left shoulder, her forehead resting against my arm. Deadeye was leaning in the doorway, watching me, his face impassive.

There were voices and outside the wagon was Cap Brady and Margo. Cap was telling Colonel Indimi to begin planning to go for Kegel's supply train. It was time.

Stays was there, outside the sled, leaning against a taut tent rope. He was reading his precious copy of the *Law*. That was when I realized just how much the *Law* meant to me. It was a gift just as much as Black Max's life was a gift, and the *Law* was our gift; our gift to each other; our gift to the future.

I was given the choice between the Forever Sand and the river of eternal love, and, even though I knew I would call myself an asshole a thousand times over for it, I chose the sand. I did it partly because what Black Max had said really was the underlying truth of the universe: life is no promise, no right, no privilege. Life is a gift too precious to squander away just because it's painful. There was another reason.

As I hovered above the camp, I saw a man in a desert sheet watching the sled where the Wolf was gorming in my brain. There were lots of sharks watching and waiting. It was something that many cared what happened to Bando Nicos. Thousands. This particular man, however, was sticking something beneath his sheet that I didn't even know that they had on Tartaros. It was a pistol. I just had to come back to life to ask him about that.

There were some others, too. All of the cockroaches were there. Pendril, Rossiter, Grahl, and a few others. They were in deep, whispering among themselves, probably plotting on starting up a law school.

It faded.

I floated on dry water and went to sleep. When I awakened I had been whirling down a deep blackness for a billion years. It suddenly came to me that all I really needed to do to see the light and end the darkness was to open my eyes. I did and for a moment there was a smear of colors while the damned static I ever heard filled my ears.

I opened my eyes again and I could see the Wolf's face filling my vision. A stab of pain electrified my head, but I couldn't scream. All I could do was black out again and wonder about why I had chosen to come back to the Forever Sand, and why I had thought that you could cut into a human brain without it hurting. I could've sworn I'd read that somewhere. Whatever it was the Wolf was doing in my head hurt worse than a flaming bamboo manicure.

"Bando?"

Something was different. Something very important. I opened my eyes again and saw Alna's face. As I looked at her I thought what an amazing thing it was that she chose to be with Bando Nicos, Razai Cop. What an incredible creature a woman is. What an incredible creature this woman is.

How many times had she been raped? How many times had men shit on her body, her life, her dreams? Yet she could hold all that at bay long enough to care what happened to one little chili pepper. She could reach out her hand and stroke my hairy cheek. She could cry for me. She could bend down and kiss me with lips salty with honest tears. Her tears made me feel guilty because I wasn't worth a single one of them.

Alna. The crease of her thigh against her groin, the strain of her breasts against her shirt, the arc of her neck meeting her shoulder, the tremble of her soft lips, the look in her huge brown eyes, was Alna and she was there for me. How filled the universe was with miracles.

"Bando?"

I tried my mouth. I couldn't hear myself.

## Kill All the Lawyers — Part III

She held my right hand as she dropped to her knees and smothered my fingers with hot, wet tears and kisses. I reached up my other hand toward the Spider, somehow thanking this spirit for another chance, for my life, for my purpose, and for Alna. I felt like a totally different being and I wondered about this incredible difference in me. I lowered my hand and stroked Alna's cheek, feeling the tears, treating them like liquid diamonds.

It was still hard to accept that anyone could shed tears over something that had been done to Bando Nicos. I'd caused so many tears, which is why I figured I didn't deserve any. Still, I was getting some.

"Bando. I knew you couldn't die. I just knew it. You're alive."  
"I love you."

She closed her eyes and held my hand to her cheek. Electric pain entered my right eye and shot out the back of my head. It made me stiffen, and it made me think. There was still some unfinished business that needed tending.

"The bastard who did this to me," I whispered. "Who?"

"It doesn't matter. You're alive!"

"Believe this: it matters."

"We don't know."

"They sat around and held my hand and let the perp stroll, eh? Shit, what a police force." My mouth tasted like a lughox had wiped its ass on my tongue. "What day? What day is it?"

"The twenty first."

Twenty one, I thought. The shooter had caught me on the twentieth. Three days had passed. What about Kegel? How was Bloody Sarah doing out in the desert? Who was bossing the Razai? Before the lights went out, Cap didn't look like he was going to take the job. If he hadn't, who had?

I closed my eyes as another stab of pain seemed to enter my right eye and burn its way to the center of my skull. All of the issues would have to wait. The Razai had survived three days without me holding its hand. It could survive a little longer.

In between the blinding stabs of pain, there were other things to ponder. There was a vague image of a man in the shadows concealing a pistol beneath his desert sheet. Was it only part of a dream? A hallucination caused by the Wolf jamming an ice pick into my lobes? Or had my spirit seen what it thought it had seen? That's the trouble with flying souls and out-of-body trips. Nobody ever thinks to take notes.

I felt Alna's hair against my arm. "Alna. Kiss me."

She got up off her knees and gently touched her lips to mine. "I love you, Bando. I was so afraid. Don't ever leave me."

That's what the big difference was, I thought. I could let her love me. I could love. Love was the difference. It didn't matter where we were, who we were, or that Kegel and his thirty thousand rifles were after us. It didn't matter that the Hand was waiting for us in the Sunrise Mountains with half a million armed soldiers. All that mattered was the gift of my life, love, and finding the bastard who shot me.

"Never away from you, Alna. The Eyes. Look at the Eyes." She was smiling and nodding, her eyes submerged in tears.

"Look at the Eyes of the Spider and know I'm looking at them too."

I fell asleep again, the warm edges of a diamond drop for a blanket, Alna's hand for an anchor, the image of the Spider above me.

### RECOVERY'S JUST ANOTHER NAME FOR CRAPPING IN YOUR BED

For days I was beyond telling the difference between the heat of day and the cold of night. There were moments when things were clear and Alna, Nance, and I would talk, or I'd talk with Stays, Cap, or Marietta. Mercy Jane, Alna, and Delia always seemed to be hovering over me, taking a pulse, peeking into my eyes, changing the bandage on my head. Every now and then Wolf would be sitting on one of the built-in couches, his arms folded, his eyes staring at me. At other times everything would blur making it tough to tell the difference between dreaming and being awake. An infection eventually settled in and life became one long nauseous nightmare.

The shadows parted for a moment once as Stays drifted in to tell me that they'd put Deadeye Jay Ostrow on trial for shooting me. Jay went for a jury and the jury wasn't willing to bet their own lives on him being guilty, so they let him off.

Alna half-kneeling, half-sitting next to my bed, holding my hand, her head resting against the mattress, sleeping as the bed rocked with the movement of the sled.

Pill Phil wandered in once to tell me that he had gone into a CSA meeting and it had helped him a lot. He suggested I try it.

Mercy Jane apologized for the infection. She had scrubbed and boiled everything a dozen times. I wanted to suggest that maybe the perp hadn't sterilized the slug he'd shot into my head, but I passed out first.

Wolf sitting there in the shadows, studying me. "Why're you looking at me?" I whispered.

"I attempted an operation on you that should have been impossible in a well equipped operating room staffed by a platoon of skilled specialists."

"So, how'd it go?"

He leaned back against the wall, folded his arms, and said, "That's what I'm waiting to find out." That boy wasn't exactly in your bedside manner hall of fame.

Sometimes the compartment door would be open and the blinding light of the sun would reflect off the sand into my eyes. I'd close them against the glare and when I'd open them again it'd be dark, the Eyes of the Spider hovering just outside the door. Sometimes Deadeye Jay would be standing there, still watching me. Once I said, "I heard they did ragtime on you."

"I got off. The system works."

"You still not emotionally involved?"

He nodded. "Business is business."

They had me stripped naked and were pouring freezing cold water on me, still I was burning up, the pain in my head shattering reality.

From the night shadows outside the sled were voices. Cap talking to Nance. The try for Kegel's supply train had been a disaster. Over a hundred dead and more taken prisoner. Indimi was almost finished training a new strike force to relieve Bloody Sarah.

Coming from the direction of the Kvasiri, we had a genuine anti-war movement going, probably centered around Lomon Paxati. The Hand slaves were white, weren't they? Rather than a wrong that needed to be righted, wasn't this poetic justice? Besides, we can't take on the world, can we?

## Absolute Magnitude

It was a joke, but a lot of sharks were listening to the straightmeats. The cockroaches were in there, of course, fanning the flames.

Things cleared, the pieces of the universe came together again, and I was just plain sick. It was the twenty ninth day since the landing. I was shot on the eighteenth. Eleven days had gone by that I couldn't remember. I was too weak to move and it made me angry enough to cry.

I hated being sick. Plenty of hard time sharks loved the occasional respiratory infection, broken leg, or self-inflicted knife wound. Maybe a few days stretched out in the bone palace eating real food, watching the vids, and reading books looked real good to someone who washed, spun, dried, and folded a couple tons of laundry every day. Not to me, though. I was happier making little ones out of big ones. Being sick meant the body had let me down. I couldn't rely on myself. I had to depend on others, which was always a big mistake. My experience relying on others had been nothing but one disappointment or betrayal after another.

I wasn't much good as a patient. I'd pee in the jug Alna'd bring but I couldn't stand even the thought of crapping out flat using the soldered metal bedpan whipped up by the trolls for Nance. Mercy Jane and Alna tried to explain to me that I had crapped all over myself plenty of times in bed without the bedpan. They didn't understand. I didn't care what I did when I was out of it. When I was inhabiting my own head, however, a bowel movement was not a community effort and was not a lie down experience. When I shit, I shit. What's more, once I've done it, I don't want people hauling it around looking at it and smelling it. My business is my business.

I held it for three days, even though it drove me into a toxic condition. The headache and nausea from that added to my constant headache from the wound, making me less cooperative than ever. Mercy Jane coaxed me, Alna begged me, and I wasn't having any of it. All I wanted to do was die.

On the thirty first day, I was so sick I couldn't whimper convincingly. Alna was with me alternating between anger at my and fear for me. Mercy Jane entered the sled followed by Nance. In Nance's hands was the bedpan. She looked down at Alna and cocked her head toward the door. "Go take a break."

"What?" I said as I looked at Alna. "No. Don't go."

Alna bent over, kissed my forehead, and looked at me with big sad eyes. "Be nice, Bando." She patted my hand and headed toward the door.

"Be nice?" I called to her back. "Get back here!"

Even the little bit of yelling had me all wore out. Nance twirled the bedpan between her hands. "You're full of shit, Nicos."

Mercy Jane grinned and pulled down my covers as she said, "It's a movement whose time has come."

I was naked and I groped with a feeble hand for the covers. "You bitches lay one claw on me 'n' I'll shave your asses with a blowtorch!" Mercy Jane reached beneath my shoulders and sat me up as Nance put the pan behind me. I had enough strength to straighten out, and I did so as the universe began spinning.

Nance stuck her face in mine and said, "You're too important to die full of crap." She reached down, picked up my left arm, twisted and bent it around behind my back until I thought a cutter'd been stuck in my shoulder socket. That sat me forward, then both of them lifted me up and dropped me on the pan.

I called them lots of names and threatened them with any number of hideous experiences, opening myself up for all kinds of unpleasantness under Rule 13. That was no big deal considering what they were doing to the Freedom Rule. I was entitled under the *Law* to go where I wanted to go, and right then I did not want to go in bed.

The pain in my gut was crippling, but I was damned if I was going to go until Nance said, "I bet if we started squeezing old shy bottom from the neck down like a big tube of toothpaste—"

Then I let go. It smelled like springtime on the back of a manure spreader. I wasn't even strong enough to use the rag to wipe myself, and Nance took care of that. I just wanted to die. Before they left the sled Nance said to me, "You're being stupid, and I think you know you're being stupid. Bando, you were the one who told me that macho was the Spanish word for asshole."

That was true, and I did start feeling better a few hours after the Great Turd Robbery. However, I concentrated on strength and recovery, and before I had to go again two days later, I was in the dunes shitting on the grit.

### BACK IN THE COPS

**I**t took several more days and by the thirty fifth day I was again on the back of a critter. Indimi's new strike force was out in the field thinning Kegel's column and collecting weapons, Sarah's bunch'd rested up and was out again, and the water and rations were very short. Paxati and the we-don't-want-to-fight-nobody movement was gathering steam.

The only reason our ticket had any rides: at all left on it was because Rhome Nazzar and a special mounted unit had done a streak for the Big Grass with the water sleds. Cap was bossing the Razai alone because Nance was again back in her bed. The word appeared in *The Taps* shortly after Mercy Jane told me. Nance was going to need another operation. Again we left her sled behind with supplies and an armed guard of fifty. I hated to leave Alna there, but nursing's where you find it. We knew how to find each other when we needed to touch.

I didn't worry about any of it. My worry was the *Law*. We had around one RC for every two thousand sharks, which meant we had over fifty cops. There were any number of problems with that. One of them was not being certain that the clup who had plugged my melon wasn't one of the RCs.

I had a constant headache. Mercy Jane was willing to drop a few diamonds on me for the pain, but I figured I already had all the problems I could handle. One thing I didn't need was a dragon on my back demanding more and more thumpers. Of course I might have been one of the lucky ones who didn't get addicted, and it was just as possible that Tartaros was only a bad dream and that I was the queen of the crowbar fairies. I stayed away from the pills.

My face was something from the sleaze street vids. It never had been pretty, but as I examined it in the polished surface of the homemade heliograph reflector, I gave up my hopes of trekking the tubes as a prime time heart throb. From the front the slug had struck the bone on the right side of my right eyeball. From there it had plowed and splintered its way back almost to my ear before it went outside the bone and through my ear. It was hard to believe that I still had the use of my right eye.

## Kill All the Lawyers — Part III

The Wolf must have plucked out a couple hundred bone fragments, and considering everything, he had done a pretty neat job, even down to the stitching. I did look like I ought to be ringing bells for Notre Dame, but the Wolf said the swelling would go down.

Cap Brady was the new number two, and all I wanted to do was sling my piece, get back on my critter, and administer the Law. My rifle was in the ordinance shack being converted by the trolls. I was back chiefting the cops and that was where I figured I belonged. Belonging was an elusive thing, though. Getting shot, edging death, and walking around with the shooter still unknown and out there set me apart. I couldn't look at anyone for any length of time without wondering. To work on anything else required all of my concentration, so I concentrated. Nance's shooter was still out there, too.

To me the investigation into Nance's shooting was going nowhere. Marantha reported that Jordie Woltz and Ow Dao had been alibied by dozens of Dao's men, a few of whom Marantha trusted, which meant she believed them. Dol Corlis, Nance's ex-lover, looked pretty good as a suspect, since she hated Nance's guts, had nothing for an alibi, and had a history as a shooter. However, she wasn't one of the ones who had been given a rifle the times they were passed out, and no one would admit to loaning her one.

Since we hadn't allowed any of the ex-Kegels or ex-Hands to carry pieces either, it narrowed the suspects down to the few hundreds who carried weapons. Except there was a problem with that. What if someone who didn't carry a piece had simply borrowed and returned a weapon? Maybe the owner didn't know, or maybe the owner was keeping quiet? It was too much stuff for an impatient man to chew. Remembering my out-of-body wanderings, I went with a hunch.

Just after I recovered enough to get out of bed and stay out, I tracked down Jak Edge. The memory was very fresh. I could close my eyes, float above the desert, and see Jak pull out a pistol that wasn't even supposed to exist on Tartaros, much less in the hands of one of Kegel's ex-patrol bosses.

It was early in the morning and Jak was setting up his sheet in the shade of a dune. I was sitting on my critter, my head shaded by the umbrella Alna made for me. Jak noticed me and asked, "Something you want?"

I nodded, suddenly feeling very embarrassed. If I was right, and he had been the shooter, I was taking a big risk seeing him by myself. It would've been an easy thing for him to kill me and take off. But I wanted to talk about some weird things, and didn't want any witnesses if I turned out to be packed to the rafters.

I climbed down from my critter and sat down on the sand facing him. I rested my elbows on my knees as I looked up at him. "Jak, do you carry a piece?"

"No. I don't. None of the Razai from Kegel's gang do. You don't let the ex-Hand Razai carry weapons either."

"Does that piss you off?"

"Piss me?" He grinned and shook his head. "Hell, no. Nothin' else'd make any sense. I never expected you to arm your enemies."

"Former enemies."

"Suit yourself."

He went back to setting up his sun shield. I dragged the tip of my tongue over my dry lips. "Jak, I think I saw you with a piece."

He shrugged and held out his hands. "It wasn't me."

I rubbed my eyes, cursed my headache, and remembered as I spoke. "I was shot, I was down, and I was out. But when I was dying and the Wolf was sticking an ice pick into my brain, I saw a lot of strange things. I saw things I didn't expect."

"Such as?"

"I saw you watching this sled."

His eyebrows went up. "I was watchin' it. So was the whole camp." His bearded face smiled. "We all cared what happened."

I brushed away the bullshit. "What about the piece I saw you stick under your sheet?"

His eyebrows went up. "Oh. You mean this?"

He reached beneath his quilted jacket and pulled out the gleaming silver pistol I'd seen when I was dying. As I looked at it I knew I was maggot chow. I knew I was going to die. As has happened before, however, I was wrong. He turned the pistol around, held it by the barrel, and handed it to me.

"It's my son's. It's a toy."

I took it and turned the thing over in my hands. It certainly looked like a real Old West revolver. The face of the hammer, however, was flat, and the barrel had a screw right through the middle of it to hold the two halves of the gun together. I frowned at Jak. "A toy?"

"An antique cap pistol. The spring in the hammer was busted and my boy gave it to me to fix. I had it with me on patrol."

I worked the trigger and the gun clicked. The barrel rotated, the hammer lifted, but it didn't fall. I handed the toy back to Jak. "Sorry. I had to check it out, though." I felt like it was time for Nance and Mercy Jane to kick the shit out of me again. A real butt-brain.

He took it and looked at it as he said, "While I was waitin' to find out about your operation, I did pull this out. I was thinkin' about my son, missin' him. Holdin' this and lookin' at it seemed to bring me closer to him." He tucked it back beneath his jacket. "And you saw that?"

"Yeah." I leaned back, rested my elbows in the sand, and nodded. I felt very foolish. "I saw all that."

"I never believed in things like that. Out-of-body experiences, telepathy, spooks."

"Me neither." I pushed myself to my feet, got on my critter, and got the hell out of there. I didn't know what I was good for, but I decided to leave the detecting to Marantha Silver. Maybe all I was good for was some kind of fuzzy blue yard gurn. Doing cops right then didn't seem to fit my lock.

MAKHUMBI V. JACKSON ET/DODD V. MAKHUMBI

By sunset I was on my critter ambling through the ranks of the main walking column as they bundled up for the night's march. Since the Wolf had my ice pick and the Trolls had my piece in for conversion to semi-auto, my only weapon was the umbrella Alna had made to keep the sun off me. It was a four-sided pyramid of white cloth propped open with greensticks, with another greenstick for a handle. It kept me in the shade.

The headache never did leave me and the only non-chemical relief I could get was to concentrate on something else. There was more than a scatter on our platter, so topics weren't a problem. The problem was which thing to pick first. Paxati and the straightmeats,

## Absolute Magnitude

for example, were dragging their feet about taking on the Hand. Their plan was to kiss and make up with Boss Kegel, turn south, and set up a we-just-love-everybody utopia.

What about the fourth law? What about the requirement not to just stand by when a crime is being committed?

That's simple. The law was made; it can be unmade.

What about the slaves being held by the Hand?

What about them? They're not Razai, are they? They're all white, aren't they? To hell with them. We have to look out for Number One.

I'd find myself looking down my nose at them. They just hadn't polished those crowbars. They wouldn't recognize stripes on a tiger. They didn't have it. They weren't good enough. Bando Nicos was a snob. I wrestled that one down and ordered it into my personal black hole. It doesn't matter how obvious a truth was to me, I had to learn mine the hard way. As they say in CSA, everybody is where they're supposed to be: he and thee, even me. Everybody has to do his own research. I didn't object to that. I just didn't want the Razai to have to pay for the experiment.

We'd been getting in some new recruits from Kegel's column. After they'd been wiped, they were given the options: join the Razai, hit the dunes after pledging never to take up arms against the Razai again, or die. From them the RCs were collecting up and passing along to headquarters reports of strange doings in Kegel's gang. One of his scavenger leaders, a woman named Anna Tane, seemed to have a spell on Kegel. It was making him do strange and cruel things. Just as a for instance was a punishment called gut stringing. It was a very slow, very painful, very humiliating way to die. They blamed Anna Tane for the crazy way Deke Kegel was conducting the campaign. The woman was supposed to be as beautiful as Kegel was ugly.

As I moved through the column of sharks, my wig smoking with issues, I saw a jam up ahead. As I came nearer I saw about two thousand sharks covering the facing sides of four dunes, which could mean only one thing: a trial. I pulled up once I could see who was on the guns.

The Magic Mountain, Marietta Jackson, was the RC investigator, and she was backed up by Deadeye Jay. There was a full sack of provisions at Marietta's feet. It was the kind the folks from Earth get issued on the way out the hatch.

Jason Pendril, the cockroach who had been involved in a couple of my cases, looked to be representing a huge yard monster named Itui Makhumbi. As I listened I pieced together that Makhumbi was suspected of thinning a fellow named Harry Dodd over an old crowbar beef. There were plenty of witnesses to the institutional agony back on Earth, but the only evidence linking Makhumbi to the killing on Tartaros was an extra sack of rations which also contained the belongings of Harry Dodd, including an old-fashioned windup wristwatch inscribed on its back with, "To Harry from Belle." Why anyone would steal a watch geared to Earth time on a planet with twenty-seven-hour-long days might make you wonder, but as a former thief myself I know there are times when fingers have minds of their own.

Pendril spoke for Itui Makhumbi, and he refused either to enter a plea or explain how the articles had come into the defendant's possession. Instead, Pendril's amazing defense was a relic from the juicer.

"You have no case—nothing—against Itui Makhumbi. No witnesses to the knifing, in fact no one who has seen them together since the landing."

"What about the stuff he had?" Marietta demanded as she pointed a finger at the sack of provisions. "What about the double rations, the watch, and Harry Dodd's other things? How do you explain them?"

"If the *Law of the Razai* means anything, there is nothing to explain." Pendril assumed a pose of self-righteousness that would've done credit to anyone looking down from a cross. "This so-called evidence of yours was obtained illegally. It's inadmissible."

As the dunes grumbled, I nodded as I realized why Pendril hadn't gone for a jury trial. If he had tried that line of horseshit on a thirteen shark jury he'd be lucky if they didn't demand his execution along with his client's. He was banking on a strict interpretation of the rules. The thing he didn't realize was that was exactly what he was going to get.

"The evidence is the evidence," said Marietta.

The cockroach warned to his subject. "Are you saying, then, that the people are the only ones who have to obey the law? That the RCs are above the law? Are you saying that to get a conviction the RCs can break whatever laws they wish?"

Marietta's face darkened into a glower. "The fact, cockroach, is that Makhumbi cut Dodd for his pack and put him into the maggot trough. There's not a shark within hearing that doesn't know that for a fact."

"But you wouldn't have known that except that you broke the law yourself."

I scratched the back of my neck as I listened to the angry grumble from the dunes. It was real clear to the sharks what needed to be done, and it was clear to me as well. How was the only question. Pendril hadn't a clue about the reality he was standing in, and the only issue was, did Marietta have an answer?

I knew the Magic Mountain had guts, but I'd never seen her run a trial before. She was big enough to crush your average yard monster, and lots of times people think because you're big you're not very bright. But it was her case. I wasn't going to butt in unless I was asked.

Marietta looked at me for a long moment, then she grinned broadly and said to Deadeye, "Itui Makhumbi has accused the RC of stealing his stuff. It's okay with me if you decide the thing." She looked at Pendril. "What about you?"

Pendril placed his hands upon his hips. He held his head to one side and frowned. "You mean, you're going to have a trial within a trial? This doesn't make any sense."

"Stealing's a crime in the Razai, cockroach. It makes sense to get this out of the way first. Is it okay with you if Deadeye handles it, or do you want to do a thirteen?"

Pendril glanced at Itui Makhumbi and the big man shrugged and folded his arms. "Don't matter to me. Just so they can't use it, like you said."

Pendril faced the Magic Mountain. "Very well," said the cockroach. "Jay Ostrow is acceptable, although I still don't see the point. The evidence was still obtained illegally."

"I confess," said Marietta as she picked up the sack of provisions. "I took the pack away from Itui Makhumbi without his permission."

## Kill All the Lawyers — Part III

Deadeye studied Marietta for a beat. Turning his head he glanced at me and, without changing expression, said, "My decision is payback. Give him his kit back plus a little." He went back to looking at Marietta, Makhumbi, and his cockroach.

Marietta took a number of food items from her own sack and dropped them into Makhumbi's. She then brought the sack over to Pendril and handed it to him. "That's square," she said.

Pendril looked at her out of the corner of his eye. "Very well." "Case closed," said Deadeye.

Marietta looked from Pendril to Itui, removed her rifle from her shoulder, and blew Makhumbi out of his sox with a shot just to the left of chest center. He hit the sand with a loud groan, and then he was still. The way Pendril's mouth was opening and closing he looked like a beached bass.

"You killed him," he said at last.

"Nothin' gets by you," she pointed down at the pooped perp. "The man murdered," said Marietta. "The payback for murder in the Razai is everything plus a little. I had to act for a dead man, and that requires the max. It's the Law."

"That's not the point!"

"It is in the Razai." She poked his chest with her sausage of a finger. "That is *exactly* the point." She turned and looked up at the crowd. "Makhumbi's payback to Dodd is everything plus a little, so Dodd gets all of Makhumbi's stuff. Did Harry Dodd have a squeeze or a bungle buddy?"

There was a lot of look around until someone shouted, "Harry was a loner."

Marietta turned to Deadeye. "Get his stuff and give it to the supply sled."

As the crowd on the dunes began breaking up, the Magic Mountain looked around, saw me, and walked over. When she was standing next to my critter, she looked up at me and raised her eyebrows. "How come you didn't butt in, down an' brown?"

"You seemed to be doing okay."

She reached up, placed her hand on my arm, and squeezed it. "Thanks." She turned about and headed off toward the front of the column.

Deadeye stood there on the sand looking thoughtful. When the crowd had thinned out a bit, he kept his gaze on me as he cocked his head toward Pendril and his cooling client. "What do you think about that?"

"It looks like a bad season for kitbag killers."

"Is there a difference between what the RCs do and what I used to do on contract?"

I had to chuckle. A hitter with a guilty conscience? "Yeah. It don't pay as good." I pointed toward the stiff. "Ghosts beginning to bother you, Deadeye?"

He shook his head. "No. Just trying to find out which string rings what bell." Deadeye turned, mounted a critter, and wandered off after the Magic Mountain. I would have loved to have been there when he was doing ragtime for the Bando Nicos shooting. I wondered if his face ever changed expression.

Pendril was standing on the sand next to his client. I coaxed my critter over to his side and looked down at the cockroach. "I don't get it, Pendril."

"Get what?"

I held out my hand toward the deceased. "I don't see what you get out of trying to do this kind of work. Back on Earth there was at least big money in it. Maybe a little prestige among the rest of

the roaches. Fame, glory, your own parking place. Maybe now and then you could feel good about helping someone who couldn't help himself. I don't see it here. Makhumbi could've gotten executed all by himself."

Jason Pendril placed his hands on his hips. The wisps of his remaining hair blew in the cooling desert breeze. "My whole life has been dedicated to the law, Nicos. I was sidetracked for a bit, which is why I'm here. It's nothing you'd notice here in the middle of the hell you've created, but I am rather well qualified to do what I do."

I nodded. "Like a lot of others, I've seen my share of trials on Earth. It must be pretty exciting out there in front of the black rag, waving your arms around, dueling with your mind, wit, and skill against an opponent for life and death stakes."

"It is. But that isn't anything like what you've created here."

"The Law is something we all created. I think I told you before, cockroach. Winning here isn't beating the other guy or the system. Winning is when we get justice, and justice is everyone—"

"Everyone getting exactly what they deserve as fast as possible," he completed. "But does what went on here today mean that whenever an RC is willing to be found guilty of a small crime they can use illegal means to obtain evidence?"

I scratched the back of my neck as that shooting headache drilled my right eye and continued out through the back of my head. When it subsided I said to the cockroach, "Maybe. But right now a murderer's done his payback and is belly up to the Spider. Somehow that seems to be a lot closer to justice than letting him off because the other side got penalized on points. It's not a contest or a game, cockroach. Even you can't figure your pigeon was innocent."

"No, but—"

"But nothing. Look, Pendril, I know I've given you a hard time in the past, and that had nothing to do with you. It's just that you're a cockroach and I hate cockroaches—"

"Why?"

"How long you been in the crowbars, man?" I sat back on my critter and pulled my right leg up and crossed my ankle over the beast's back. "Look around you, money threads. You are in the middle of the results of millions of lawyers who got rich failing. The cockroaches who made the laws, the cockroaches who argued and judged according to those laws, all of the losers who then went and had a drink with the guys who beat them."

"The law on Earth isn't one huge scam the way you think it is, Nicos! We aren't some brotherhood of thieves!"

I scratched at my chin whiskers. "Okay, Jase, I'll give you this much. All lawyers aren't thieves. I've even known a couple who tried their best to get some squares for Bando Nicos, and felt real bad when they couldn't score. Lawyers being crooks isn't the problem."

"What is the problem?"

"Lawyers think different than everybody else. They're trained to think different. The honest ones think like little computers programmed with rules, events, conditions, sequences, and commands. In their own playing field, the courts, the crooked cockroaches take advantage of the rules. That's easy to do when everyone looks at nothing but the rules and forgets what the rules are supposed to do. A cockroach's head is filled with rules, arguments, and accounts receivable files. These are the guys who



## Absolute Magnitude

make up the laws, who prosecute violators, defend the perps, judge the contests, and work the appeals."

"Yes," said the cockroach. "That's why it's a profession. What's your point?"

"People. The point is people. The world isn't made up out of lawyers. It's made up out of people. Here the law isn't a thing or a game for lawyers. Here the law is for the people."

He stood silently for a moment, shaking his head. He just didn't see it. Maybe he was thinking the same thing about me. I didn't know. My head was hurting so badly I could feel myself being tempted to pass out. I steered my critter back toward Nance's sled far behind the rear guard. The way my head was pounding I decided to work Mercy Jane for one of the diamond drops.

"Dammit, Nicos!" came Pendril's voice from behind me, "I don't understand!"

I called back over my shoulder. "Results are all that count, Pendril. The rules don't count at all, if they don't deliver the results. The results we're after is justice. Change the way you think, cockroach. When you stop thinking like a cockroach and start thinking like a people, you'll understand."

I left him back there in the sand, pondering his past and his present. I figured he was in big personal trouble because, if all he wanted was something to do, we could have found something for him to do. But if he saw what I saw, the *Law*, what it was, and what it was becoming, and if he craved to be a part of the process, he and the rest of the cockroaches were the last ones who should have anything to do with it.

Cockroaches try to bend reality to fit the rules. That was what they were trained to do. That was all that they were good for. In the Razai we made the rules fit our reality. It was the reality benders who got trimmed off.

On the way back to the hospital sled, the Eyes of the Spider were gleaming brightly. I dozed in and out as my critter moved through the rear guard. My headache went to sleep after awhile, and I'd half made up my mind to forget the thumper. Still, I wanted to see Alna, so I kept pushing west. Blue Moon wasn't out, but it hung there in my mind like a turd in the wind.

Pendril was right about one thing. We were in the middle of a hell. The big crime in the universe wasn't us. We owed plenty of dues, but Tartaros was overpriced. The hightowers on Blue Moon owed some payback. The administration that governed them owed. It might take years, it might take decades, but there was a piece of me that had already vowed to reach the moon, take it, and bring the lockwatchers to justice. In particular I wanted the crawlers who'd let in the gun runners and were buying their bacon by soaking the planet in murder and war.

At one point I noticed that there was a rider following me. By turning slightly I could catch a flash out of the corner of my eye. The Hand? Kegel? They'd had patrols out trying to catch stragglers. Maybe it was Nance's shooter snipping off a loose end. Maybe it was my shooter. Out on the sand by myself, I'd be easy to pop off. Especially since I had no weapons. Maybe it was Deadeye.

Before I could even begin to think about what to do, I was startled by a hellish amount of rifle fire straight ahead where Nance's sled was. I kicked my critter along to the top of the nearest dune, but could see nothing. I kicked him along again and in a moment I was joined by about fifteen mounted rifles headed in the same direction.

We reached where the hospital sled was just as the sky turned light. Along with a dozen of our guards, the Wolf was shot up and on the sand. He looked like he had taken one in the left thigh and through the palm of his right hand. So much for all those years cutting up frogs on foundation grants.

I climbed down from my critter and went over to the Wolf. He was wrapping his hand with an almost clean cloth. He already had a cloth around his thigh.

"What happened?"

"They hit us without warning, Bando. Maybe seventy or eighty mounted rifles. We have about twenty dead here that are Razai. The other three belong to Kegel. What was left of the sled guard took off after the raiders, but from the way it sounded back here, Kegel had a trap set for them." He shook his head and finished tying his bandage with his teeth and good hand. When he was finished, using a rifle as a crutch, he struggled to his feet, his face wincing at the pain in his leg. He looked around at the bodies. "They must've taken out the flank guard or sneaked around it—"

"Where's Alna?"

"They have her. They have Nance Damas and Jane Sheene, too. All of our medical supplies. They want to negotiate, Bando. Nance Damas, Jane Sheene, and your Alna are the hostages."

"Negotiate? Negotiate what?" He shook his head. I turned my critter back toward the center of the column. Just coming into the area was the rider who had been following me. It was Deadeye. "Where are you going?" shouted the Wolf.

My head was pounding so hard I could hardly see. The dunes and the faces before me thumped in and out of focus. "The ordinance sled. I got to get a piece." I turned to the leader of the mounted riders. "What's your name?"

He said something, but it didn't get through the pounding in my head. "Find Martin Stays, Cap Brady, and Jak Edge. Have 'em meet me at the ordinance sled. I'm going to need some rifles and some shooters. Got it?"

"Right!"

He shouted an instruction to his number two, turned his critter, and dusted off. I rode up to Deadeye and said, "You come with me." I rode east.

An image of Alna's eyes hovered before me. They were filled with tears and she was telling me about the times she was raped and how she would die before letting anything like that happen to her again.

I chased the image and the memory away. I forced everything inside myself to shut down. I kindled a blue flame of deadly purpose. I couldn't allow my fears for Alna to touch my mind. I couldn't allow even an edge of this pressure of rage to enter my awareness. Death was my name, my meaning. I repeated it beneath my breath a thousand times.

HURACK V. AHADMJANI

66 Remember what you got there is a lever-action piece that's been made gas operated."

To work on the extra weapons Bloody Sarah was bringing in, the Trolls had expanded into a second sled and now had eleven men and women working for them. There were two fat men turning a crank for all they were worth and a woman next to them pushing a sharp hunk of metal into a turning piece. They actually had a working metal lathe. The smell in the ordinance sled

## Kill All the Lawyers — Part III

was made up of strange root oil, hot metal, and familiar super stale sweat. The odor, combined with my headache, made me want to puke.

Chief Troll, Emmet Stant, pointed at the bottom of the rifle just forward of the trigger guard. "There's where the piston and rod'll come shooting out to yank open the bolt and pick up the new round. It acts just like a pair of scissors. When you fire, don't have your fingers wrapped around the stock there or you'll be picking them up off the sand."

I nodded, impatient to get after Alna's kidnappers. "Yeah, okay. Important safety tip."

"To get full automatic, just twist this little nut here clockwise." He pointed at a square piece of metal that protruded from the left side of the trigger housing. "Those things come out in case you want to prevent anyone else using the thing. Once they're out, the piece is junk, so don't lose it."

"Fine." On the other side of the trigger housing was an opening into which the Troll stuck one of his homemade forty round clips. A belt with six of those loaded clips attached to it was looped over my shoulder. Stant scratched at his beard and looked at me as his silver-peppered eyebrows went up.

"We've tested the things, but they weren't designed to withstand full automatic fire."

I picked up the rifle, loaded a round into the empty chamber, and slung it. "So, sooner or later, it's going to blow up in my face."

The Troll shrugged. "It's possible."

"It didn't come with a warranty, so don't worry about it."

He pointed at the red button to the rear of the trigger guard.

"The safety still works."

"So?"

He turned his back and reached for his tools. "Just another important safety tip."

I nodded at my faithful companion. "Get one for Deadeye."

"Bando?" It was Cap Brady's voice calling from outside.

I stood in the doorway of the sled. Cap and about a dozen armed and mounted Razai riders were waiting outside on the sand. All of them wore the sand colored desert sheets and were toting converted rifles. In the distance, Jak Edge was riding in our direction accompanied by the man I had sent to fetch him. I looked at Brady. "Cap, I'm going after the perps who took Nance, Alna, and Mercy Jane."

He looked over my ammo belts, newly converted rifle, and umbrella. "How're you doing, Bando?"

I looked down at him from the sled. "What do you mean, how am I doing? How am I doing what?"

Cap's shoulders went up and down slightly as he continued to fix me with his sharp blue eyes. "What I mean is, are you in control, or is your monster in control?"

He meant, of course, my rage. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I'm chief of the RCs. Kegel's gang just nabbed three of our people, along with all of our medical supplies. It's cop work. I'm a cop. It's my job to go after the perps."

"By yourself?"

"No, not by myself. I'm taking Jak Edge with me, Deadeye, and I sent that guy to get you to supply me with some shooters."

Cap glanced at Jak then looked back at me. "Bando, what about the RCs?"

"We're stretched to the limit. I can't spare anyone."

"Neither can the army."

I pointed at the armed riders. "What about these chups? I don't know 'em, but they don't seem to be doing much of anything."

"They've been doing guard on the main column. Maybe I can spare them. We'll do some introductions." There was some distant shouting. As Deadeye emerged with his new weapon and stood just behind me, Cap turned on the back of his critter and looked toward the north. I looked and more riders appeared. They were followed by a large number of sharks on foot.

"What in the hell is that all about?" muttered Cap.

"It doesn't matter. If it's cop work, have Stays handle it. I got to get moving."

"Stays's with 'em," Jak Edge observed.

I didn't care. Stays was a lot smarter than me, so whatever it was, he would have to deal with it. I gave my shooters a quick scan. I didn't recognize a single one of them. From orange painted hair to wild-eyed stare, they were about a creepy-looking bunch. I looked back at Cap. "Where'd you get these birds?"

"They're all Cicis. I've been working with them the past few days."

I leaned over and said, "You want me in front of a posse of armed homicidal maniacs?"

"I said it's all I can spare. They ought to do all right. At least they're motivated."

Cicis. A string of armed killer popcorns. Not just that, either. They all carried converted rifles. Well, I thought, maybe that's what I need for this job. The bunch of us on full automatic could lay down one hell of a fire storm for a couple of minutes. Maybe you had to be crazy to ride out after Kegel.

"Okay, popcorns. You're all deputized. Do you whacks have a leader?"

The nearest one to me, a pale hulk with one black eyebrow resting atop bug eyes that never seemed to be pointing in the same direction at the same time, broke out into a big smile. "You are, Chief."

"Terrific." I pointed at him as Stays and the new crowd came rolling up. "Bug Eyes, I want you to ride in front of me and keep that piece pointed up at the Spider. Understand?"

His eyes each did independent scans of the day sky as that eyebrow writhed about on his forehead. "Let's go." I faced Stays.

"While I'm gone, you run the RCs."

"Hold it," he answered as more walkers and riders joined the assembly. "Not so fast, Bando. We have a problem."

"So handle it. I got to get moving."

"It's a very strange problem in a very strange trial." Stays looked over his shoulder at the crowd. As he looked back at me he pointed with his thumb over his shoulder. "Here it comes now."

There were a couple hundred sharks working their way between the dunes. I could make out Jason Pendril, Lane Rossiter, and Lewis Grahl. Whatever the problem was, it drew roaches. Jontine Ru was there, too. She was mounted on a critter and was taping the whole thing.

It was like trying to do the butterfly stroke in cold molasses. Nance and Alna were in trouble. I had things to do. I didn't have time to exchange hot air with the cockroaches. "If you've got something that requires a new rule, Stays, then you be the clearinghouse until I return. Okay? You know what happened to Alna, Nance, and Mercy Jane?"

## Absolute Magnitude

"No, that's not okay, Sherlock. This is something different." He looked around then said very quietly, "Yeah, I know what happened to them. But I don't know what to do here."

"You don't know what to do?"

"That's right. I've listened to what everybody's said," he nodded at the cockroaches, "and I'm not sure we have this covered. If we don't, I don't know what new rule to cook up."

I let out a short sigh of exasperation and nodded at Stays. "Okay, let me have it. Quick."

"This might take longer than that." He glanced again at the moving trial, and began. "The victim is Walt Hurack. You know him from back in the Crotch."

I nodded. "An asshole. What happened?"

"Walt was working his mouth and a fellow named Nuris Rhadmajani shut it for him with a cutter."

"Was it a threat? Did Hurack threaten this Nuris Rhad—"

"Rhadmajani," answered a voice from the approaching crowd.

"Nuris Rhadmajani." The speaker was walking with his left arm across the shoulders of another man who appeared to be his twin brother. Both men were olive skinned, dark eyed, and had shaven heads. Jason Pendril was walking beside them. "He did not threaten me. He called me some names and made rude jokes about me and my brother, Peris."

I looked at Stays. "Is this my case now?"

"Yes. But there's a complication—"

"There always is." Returning my gaze to Nuris Rhadmajani, I asked, "Are you doing a thirteen, or do you want me to decide it?"

Nuris Rhadmajani grinned wickedly as he nodded. "Please, you decide."

"Okay. Then what happened?"

"I became enraged," he answered, his arm still around his brother's shoulders. "Therefore I took my knife and thrust it into Walter Hurack's heart."

I couldn't figure out what the big deal was. It was a simple case of murder with a guilty plea. I looked at Peris Rhadmajani. "Are you an accomplice to the killing?"

"No," he answered. "I tried my best to prevent him from killing the man, and once Hurack had been stabbed, I was the one who called for help. Regrettably Hurack expired before anyone could treat his wound."

I looked questioningly at Stays. "I don't get it. What's the big complication?"

Stays blinked once and said, "The Rhadmajani brothers. They're Siamese twins."

Talk about pulling the Spider's leg. I rubbed my eyes as Pendril spoke up. "Nicos, these two brothers share intestines through a tube of skin that joins them just above their navels."

"According to them," Stays interrupted, "separation would probably be very risky. We offered to let the Wolf give it a whack, but they refused separation. Without it, executing one means executing both."

"We are a unique life," said Peris Rhadmajani. "I am not sure life would be worth living separated from my brother. To do that I would have to become someone else."

Fucking Siamese twins. There are some days when it simply doesn't pay to open your eyes. This was the kind of thing stoned law students dream up for entertainment. I wondered how many different ways the Rhadmajanis had pulled this gag back in the juicer. Sending one to jail means sending them both to jail which

means condemning an innocent man, yabba, yabba, yabba. The cockroaches must've had a lot of fun with the Rhadmajani brothers. I looked at Pendril and asked, "Cockroach, do you have anything to add?"

"No. The case seems to be summed up rather well."

Pendril had a shit-eating grin on his face that reminded me of the crazy cockroach named Britton back: with the Cicis who delighted in testing the system in the hopes of seeing it break down. Lane Rossiter had a bit of a grin on himself. Maybe I was reading the faces wrong, but it looked like someone was waiting for the Chief of the RCs to break down and hire a lawyer to unravel the knot. Either that or they were waiting, maybe praying, for the Law to fail. Lewis Grahl, Tani Aduelo's old cockroach, stared at me out of a mask of hate that almost sparked. The roach brotherhood was there to get a piece of Bando Nicos. I didn't know for sure, but I half suspected that the roaches had put the Rhadmajani brothers up to it just for the sake of seeing Bando Nicos crack up on the rocks. If that was the case, my roach problem would be cleared up soon.

That was when it finally dawned on me that none of the cockroaches had ever forgiven Nance Damas for not putting them in charge of the Razzi's legal stuff. I could see it in Rossiter's face and in Pendril's. I figured Grahl was the best of a bad lot, but it was in his face, too. The law was their exclusive club, and this little uneducated killer and bank robber was crashing their party. It added a few names to the list of suspects who might have shot Nance and me. I noted for future reference that only Rossiter carried a piece.

That pain stabbed into my right eye and I gently rubbed my right temple and shook my head. "Cockroaches," I muttered.

Lewis Grahl stepped forward and looked up at me. Black as he was, I could see the heat in his face. "Nicos, cockroach is just a name. I'm damned sick of it. I want to know why you call lawyers cockroaches."

I sighed. "Jesus, I don't know, Lou. I really don't mean to offend you assholes. I guess it's just because lawyers make a profit out of poverty and misery, they've done their best to make my planet hell so they can feed off it, and they don't give a shit."

The twins had been given some free ricks back in the juicer on Mihvith. Now it was time for the Rhadmajani boys to grab a smelly piece of the real world. It was as good a time as any to try out my new shooter, so I twisted the little square nut on the trigger housing to full automatic fire. I aimed my rewlly converted rifle at Nuris Rhadmajani, pulled the trigger, and stitched him from his belly button to his heart with about five slugs. It was pretty accurate for an automatic weapon, loud as hell, but the recoil wasn't half what I expected. The Trolls did pretty good work.

Nuris screamed before he dropped. His brother screamed, too. I thought Pendril and the other cockroaches were about to give each other hysterectomies.

I slung my rifle and looked at Stays. He looked outraged. "Bando. What have you done?"

"Justice," I said to him, "It's already in the Law, Watson. If you murder, payback is the max."

Stays pointed at the momentarily surviving brother. "What about him?"

"What about me?" screamed Peris Rhadmajani.

I faced the remaining Rhadmajani. "You made your own choice, hardwood. So it's you who's responsible for it. I'm not." I

## Kill All the Lawyers — Part III

pointed at his dead brother. "You made a real bad bet, friend. Maybe back home it was a smart bet, but everyone here has been told that it's a new game. The cards you were dealt last hand don't play here. If your life depends on a murderer in the Razai not getting his paycheck, you are maggot meat."

Pendrill held out his shaking hands. "What about a pregnant woman?" he screamed. "Would you kill the mother and child both?"

"I already answered that!" I screamed back at him. "If your life depends on a murderer getting off, you're dead." I jabbed Deadeye and climbed down from the sled. We mounted our criters and I looked down at Peris Rhadmajani.

"I suggest reconsidering having that operation to separate you from your brother. You might even be able to use some of his parts, if Walt Hurack's heir doesn't want them. Just hope that the Wolf is as good a surgeon as they say he is. He got caught in the fight and now he's going to have to do the operation with one hand and standing on a bum leg."

I turned my critter toward the south, stuck the greensticks in the umbrella against the increasing heat. "Stays, while I'm gone you're head of the RCs. Stop listening to the cockroaches. Take some time out and read *The Law of the Razai*. You wrote it. It's time you learned it."

I waved my hand at Jak Edge and the posse. "Let's go."

"Nicos!" I turned and Jontine Ru was holding up her camera. "I want to go, too."

"Forget it."

"I still have a night lens."

I balanced being on camera against the ability to see at night. "Come on along."

Jak led his critter next to mine and Deadeye's and the three of us followed Bug Eyes along the trail left by Kegel's raiding party. Jontine Ru rode behind us followed by the Nicos Traveling Home for the Homicidally Compulsive.

I heard Lewis Grahl bellow as we left, "You'll pay, Nicos! This can't go on like this! Someday you'll pay!"

I didn't look back, but it suddenly occurred to me that Lewis Grahl would make a great suspect in the Bando Nicos shooting, even if he didn't carry a piece. Maybe Deadeye was too obvious a suspect. The fact that the shooter missed sort of excluded a pro like Deadeye. A cockroach shooter would be a lot more likely to bounce a slug off my skull than a contract man.

As we left the twins and their cockroaches behind, the sun beat down on us and bounced off the sand into our faces, making each breath a lung-ripper. That sizzling pain forced its way into my right eye and through the back of my head again and again. A laugh worked its way through the pain as I wondered if, when they visited me in my nightmarcs, the Rhadmajani brothers would be separated or joined as ghosts.

There wasn't much time for that. There was a job to do. As the sun baked our heads and my wound throbbled, all I could see was Alna and the fear in her eyes. The pain sharpened, I took one roasting breath too many, and things began swimming in the dark before my eyes.

There were memories that came back that I thought had been burned out by time, pain, and hate. There was Anita, that sixteen-year-old bleached goddess with the pound of makeup on each eye that I worshipped when I was fourteen and had already put in three years in the crowbars. There were moments with her in the loft

above her father's alk and drug saloon that exploded my mind. She had a body that drove me mad, and she fed off that madness until we both were insane. By the time I was seventeen, though, she was already an old woman, unsuccessfully attempting to sell her lumps of diseased flab for another bit of powder. Where was the right in that? Who could make it right?

Another image pushed its way into my memory. I was nine years old again. There was that dying cop I'd found that winter night in the hell of South Philly's Free Fire Zone. Some street slick had run the bait and teased the stain into the alley where the slick's associates had been waiting. They had beaten in his head, ripped open his guts, and had taken the stain's badge, gun, jacket, gloves, belt, shoes, and wallet. By the time they left and I came out from behind the dumpsters, the cop's eyes were open, he was dying. He had to know he was dying there in the freezing filth of that alley, his open belly steaming in the cold.

Was he consumed with pain, or was he measuring the reality of his life against his expectations? As I rode on the trail of Nance, Alna, and Mercy Jane, I would've liked to have asked that cop how his life had totaled up. But I hadn't asked him. He was a haystack cop and I was a nine year old chili pepper living on the edge of death at the bottom of a sewer in a man-controlled block. I was weak, frustrated, frightened, and full of hate.

I looked down at that cop, pulled out my dick, pissed on him, and laughed as he died. The urine steamed in the cold, and I remembered how it smelled. Right then, eighteen years later in the middle of the Forever Sand, I couldn't have gotten that smell out of my nostrils with a flame thrower.

Things seemed to slip from memory into dream land. There were no walls, no ceiling, nothing but whiteness. The cop was standing before me, holding in his guts with his hands. The whiteness around his feet was spattered with red.

His eyes were looking at me, big and brown. Maybe he wasn't a haystack. Maybe he even had a little brown sugar. He was me.

"Man," I cried, "What do you want?"

"Make it right," the dead cop answered. "Make it right."

I shook my head again and again as I felt myself slipping into the floor. "It wasn't me, man! I didn't kill you!"

"You didn't kill me." He lifted a bloody hand to point at me as his voice burst at me from deep inside my own head. "You took my last seconds!"

I sank into the stickiness of the floor, eager to pull the white over me.

"Make it right! Make it right!"

I opened my eyes and watched as the illusions, dreams, and phantasms combined and faded into the sand. I whispered to the dead cop, "I'm doing the best I can."

I sat up, opened my eyes, and stared south toward the reflection of the sun on the dunes. Maybe south, there with Kegel, was where Bando Nicos would find his peace.

The pain in my head pulled me into another sleep, and there my ghosts let me rest.

THE END



# Letters Page

Dear Sirs:

I am a high school teacher trying to begin a Science Fiction/Horror/Fantasy Club at a school called Don Bosco, which is located in the heart of downtown Boston. I have been a teacher there for the past two years, and know that a great many of the students like reading books and magazines in these areas. I myself read quite a bit and know for a fact that the students have a great deal of interest in reading these types of stories. Thus, I've decided a club of this nature, for students, would be a great place for them to meet, talk about stories they've read, magazines they've liked, books which they'd recommend to their friends, etc.

I want this club to have a good look to it also, so I'm asking if you might consider donating some promotional posters, posters of magazine covers or themes, or artists profiles, which I might hang about the room.

I would also ask if you might consider donating any piece of work that might interest High School Students, possibly sample magazines, possibly abstract, new works, older works, whatever. I would like to establish a sort of club library where members can check out the new and current fiction.

I feel that getting high school students interested in reading for pleasure will harbor a life long habit of reading for pleasure.

We are a non-profit private school, running on a very limited funds. Without your help, our club might not be the most interesting place for the students to gather. All suggestions are welcomed. I hope to hear from you soon. Thank you in advance for anything you can do for us.

Sincerely,  
Neil F. McCarthy  
Don Bosco Technical High School  
300 Tremont St  
Boston MA 02116

—Neil, I'm sending you a variety of magazines as well as some of our cover over runs. I hope your club is a huge success. I've listed your address so that my readers can help out if they wish to.

Dear Mr. Lapine

I was surprised and pleased to receive the Fall 1996 issue of *Absolute Magnitude* in the mail just last week. I was even more surprised and amused to find that you had printed my "O for 2" letter in the letters segment. Needless to say, your advice has

been heeded, and I would like to purchase a one-year subscription.

However, a want to study your magazine is not the only motivation, nor is it the largest. To my delight, your magazine has proven to be filled with rich stories and artwork from artist both experienced and just beginning. As a person who has read a wide range of science fiction magazines, including the "Big Boys" such as *Asimov's*, *Analog*, *SF Age*, and *F&SF* I find that *AM* is the most enjoyable of all.

One of the greatest things about *AM* is that there is an infectious energy about the magazine that I haven't found elsewhere. You are growing, the artist getting involved really seem to care about what messages they send and what they create.

Please keep up the good work, the SF community is in great need of it!

Brad R. Torgerson  
Mount Vernon WA

—One of the reasons I got into magazine publishing was because the big magazines seemed to have lost their sense of wonder and energy. I'm still excited by science fiction and I guess it shows.

Dear Mr. Lapine,

As I read and enjoy *Absolute Magnitude* #5, I find myself troubled about the cover. I wouldn't write you about this except that issue #3, which I got from my local Barnes & Noble, suffers from the same problem: Lack of snap and visibility.

Magazines have two audiences: subscribers and impulse buyers. Subscribers die, lose interest or run into money problems, so a steady influx of impulse buyers (who later become subscribers) is necessary for a publication's continued existence.

Now, as a subscriber, I really have no strong feelings about *AM*'s cover art. But for the impulse buyer, it's a *Mist*, in my opinion, for at least the *Banner* to stand out like neon lights. Otherwise, the magazine becomes lost in the clutter that a modern magazine-rack has become. In my local B&N, all one can usually see of the current *AM* issue is the left inch or two of the front cover.

So, while you can continue to use muted colors and pastels in the art of the cover, I strongly suggest you consider doing something to jazz up the "*Absolute*

*Magnitude*" banner. You're competing for eye-attraction on the magazine rack, and issues #3 and #5 just fail completely in this respect. (Even the folks at *F&SF* have finally realized that the banner had better be a crisp element of the cover.)

Your publication is worth reading. Catch the eyes of more potential subscribers and prove it to them.

Sincerely,  
Templeton Rex  
Richmond VA

P.S. I'm enthusiastic about seeing *AM* succeed like no other SF 'zine in recent history, so if my words are a bit too direct, let me apologize here.

—We're interested in hearing from our subscribers, and I'll pass your concerns along to the art director. The letters column isn't just for patting us on the back.

Dear Mr. Lapine,

I just last week discovered the Market Listing on the Internet, and have subscribed to it. The latest issue carries the interview with you, by Shauna Skye. It was great fun getting more information and insight into your magazine and philosophy.

Sincerely,  
Terry Hickman  
Omaha NE

Dear Warren,

It's always a good day when I spot a new issue of *Absolute Magnitude* at Barnes & Noble. Though I haven't read the stories yet, I did read your editorial, and I agree with you 100%. I see a lot of sample issues of up-and-coming magazines, magazines that are right now where *Hars4 Mistress* was when I first saw it listed in *Writer's Digest Science Fiction Source Book*. I correspond with several semi-pro editors that are intent on turning their 'zines into professional, slick publications like *Absolute Magnitude* (I should comment that in that aspect, *AM* is a role model and inspirational success story for semi-pro 'zines). These are editors that like yourself, always take the time to comment personally on submissions, take great care in the presentation of the stories they accept, and have a love of the genre.

When I hear writers complain that science fiction is dying, and that there is no place to sell their stories, I'm going to direct them to your Fall of '96 issue and tell them to read your editorial. I share your optimistic

## Letters to the Editor

attitude, and hope you have much continued success with *Absolute Magnitude*.

Sincerely,  
Christopher Holliday  
Orange CA

—Thanks, Chris, I appreciate the kind words. Your Internet market listing is a valuable service. Keep up the good work.

Dear AM,

In mid-August, I picked up a copy of your magazine at the local B. Dalton. I was impressed with the content and the quality. Enclosed is a check for \$14.00 for a one-year subscription.

The two things that stood out were the enormous number of book reviews, and a letters page. Another plus for your magazine was the Timothy Zahn interview. *Absolute Magnitude* strikes the right balance in fiction and non-fiction for my tastes.

Another bit of the magazine I liked was the ads for other magazines. For someone who is routinely unimpressed with the Big Four (*Asimov's*, *Analog*, *F&SF*, and *SF Age*), I was happy to see ads for *Tomorrow*, *Apocryphal*, *Pirate Writings*, etc.

Keep up the good work.

William G. Jennings  
Copperas Cove TX

—I'm always happy when someone likes *Absolute Magnitude* enough to subscribe, but someone who likes the ads too, wow!

### Absolute Magnitude Classified Ads

Rates: 20¢ per word per insertion; 15% discount on 3 or more insertions.

WORKY POES Differently Abled Heres. The greatest challenge of all is the human challenge. WINTER OF THE SOUL: Gay Vampire Fiction, by Gary Bowen, author of *Diary of a Vampire*. CYBER MAGIC: Lesbian SF. Women on the frontier of SF/fantasy. \$6.00 ea. ppd. Obelesk Books, POB 1118, Elkton MD 21922-1118. Send SASE for catalog.

STORY RULES, the little magazine with the great stories. \$3 single, \$10 for 4-issue subscription. Send to: Robert Collins, P.O. Box 134, Andover KS 67002.

MOONSHADOWS: Fantasies of Love and Magic. SF Humor and romance. \$6.00 ppd. Obelesk Books, POB 1118, Elkton MD 21922-1118. Send SASE for catalog.

FLYING SAUCER Information Center 7803 Ruanne Court Pasadena, MD, 21122. U.S.A.: Newsletter \$1+large S.A.S.E.

WESTERN MASSACHUSETTS' ONLY SF AND MYSTERY BOOKSTORE Thousands of titles, role-playing games, and trading card games at the Space-Crime Continuum, 92 King Street, Northampton, MA 01060. Phone (413)584-0944 or check out our website:

<http://www.io/-aylott/SpaceCrime.htm>153

LIGHT'S LIST OF LITERARY MAGAZINES 1996 Contains the names, addresses, and a brief note of interest of 850 U.S., UK, Canadian, Australian, European, and Asian Magazines that publish in English. 32 pages. US \$4.00 Surface Mail, \$5.00 Airmail. Checks payable to Dr Jrc LIGHT. MONTHLY trade jml, cartoonists/gagwriters. Many markets! \$50.00/year. Sc+\$5. Protoner, PO Box 2270, Daly City, CA 94017-2270.

FOR SALE: 1 COPY OF HARSH MISTRESS #1; will take best offer over \$100. Send inquiries to Edward Richards, P.O. Box 707, Greenfield MA 01302-0707.

We want your letters! Let us know how we're doing. If we print your letter, you'll receive a free copy of the issue in which it appears. And don't forget to vote for your favorite stories and get a chance to win a free subscription.

"High Five" by Brian Plante garnered virtually every first-place vote. "Deckplate Blues" by Algis Budrys came in second, and "Sanitary Zone" by Leslie Lupien came in third. Aaron B. Larson won a free subscription in the drawing. So don't forget to vote!

*Clarion*  
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Richard Kadrey  
Karen Joy Fowler  
Tim Powers

Deadline: March 14, 1997

Contact with SASE:

Mary Sheridan  
E-185 Holmes Hall  
Lyman Briggs School  
Michigan State University  
East Lansing, MI 48825-1107



Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Are you a subscriber? Yes/No

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Favorite stories in this issue:

1. \_\_\_\_\_ 2. \_\_\_\_\_ 3. \_\_\_\_\_